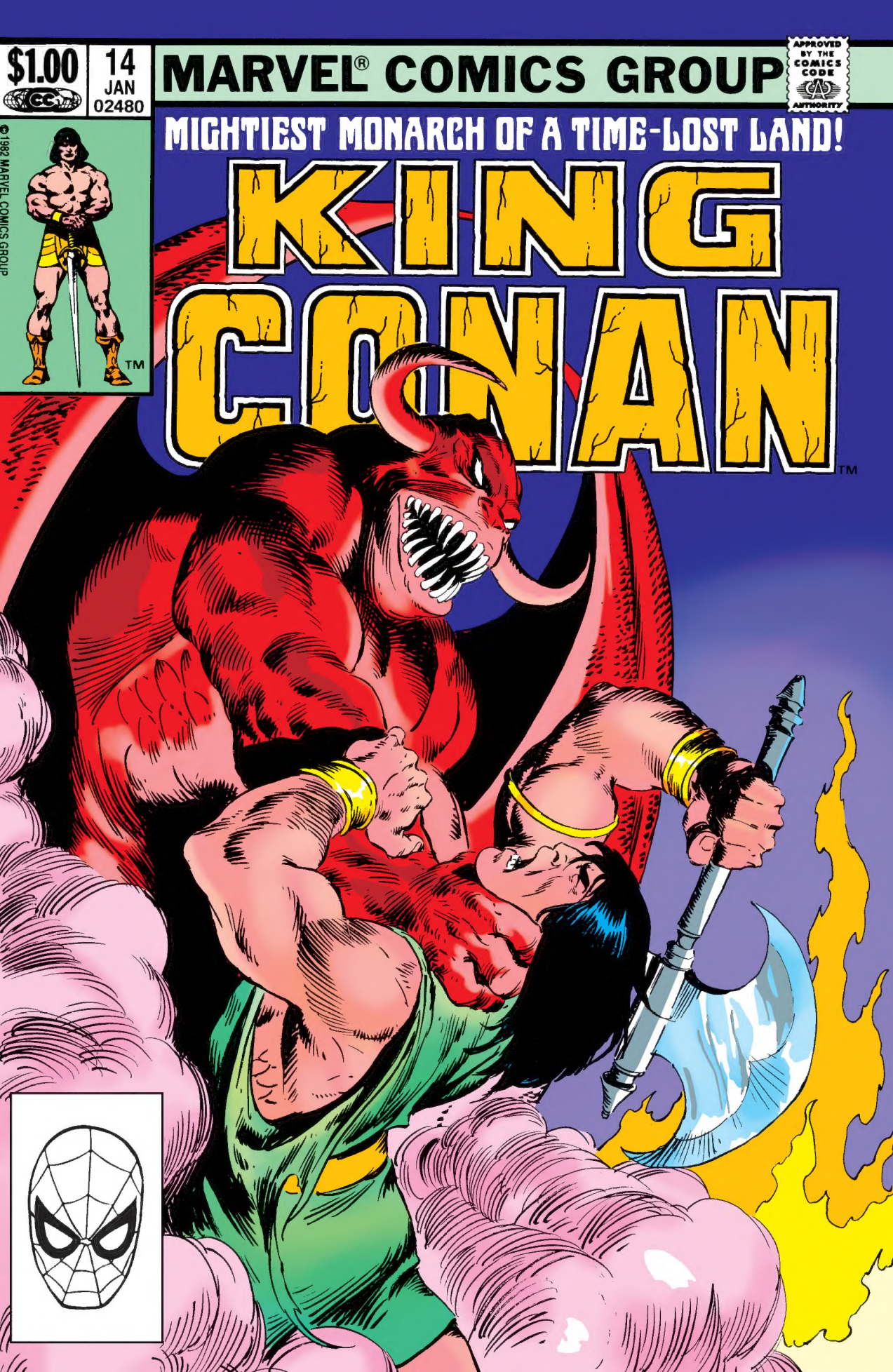
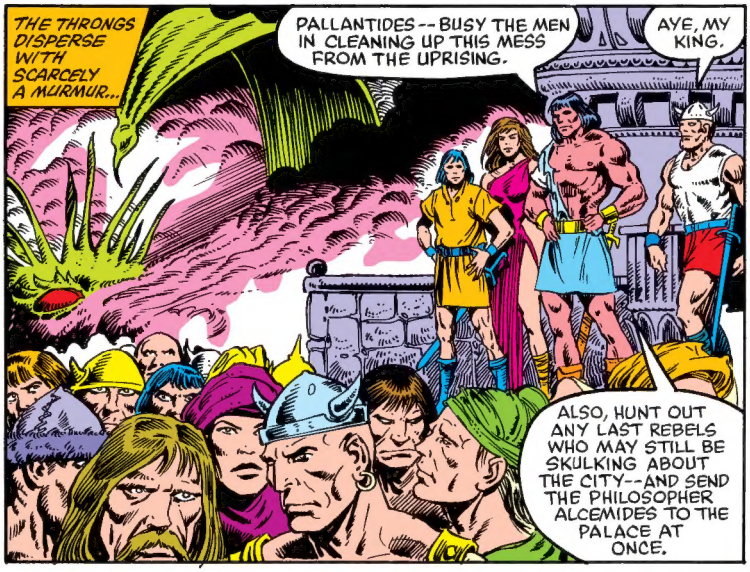
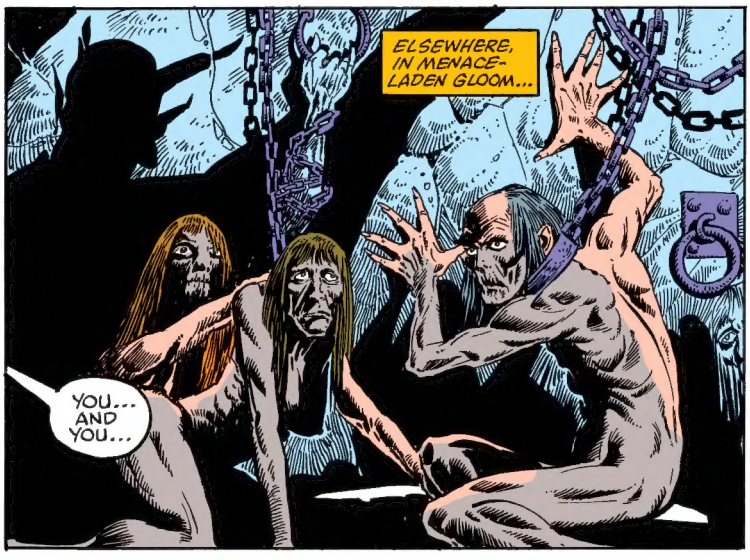

$1.00
14
JAN
02480
MARVEL® COMICS GROUP
APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY
MIGHTIEST MONARCH OF A TIME-LOST LAND!
KING CONAN™
© 1982 MARVEL COMICS GROUP

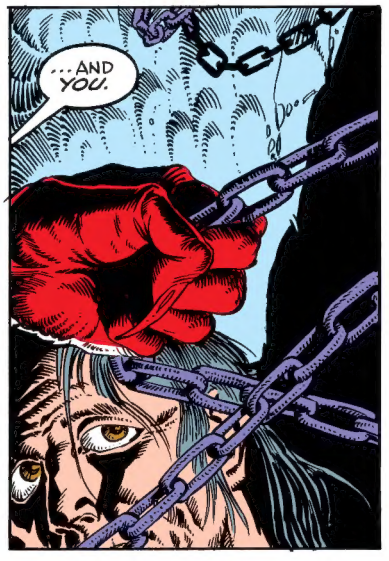
Stan Lee PRESENTS:
KING CONAN
Featuring The Epic Adventurer Created By ROBERT E. HOWARD
IN THE PALACE SQUARE OF TARANTIA, CAPITAL OF AQUILONIA, EVIL BURNS IN THE NIGHT...
KINGS OF FIRE and DARKNESS
BEHOLD, AQUILONIANS! YOU SEE THE WIZARD URAZAI'S DRAGON IN FLAMES--AND YOU SEE, TOO, THE RESULT OF THE REBELLION WHICH SOUGHT TO UNSEAT ME FROM THE THRONE!
BOTH HAVE FAILED! I STAND BEFORE YOU AS CONAN THE CONQUEROR --YOUR KING AND CONQUEROR NOW AND FOREVER! ONLY THE GODS-- IF SUCH EXIST-- CAN END MY REIGN!
NOW GO-- RETURN TO YOUR HOMES WITHOUT FEAR--AND ENJOY THE PEACE OF A JUST AND STRONG KING!
DOUG MOENCH WRITER
MARK SILVESTRI PENCILER
RICARDO VILLAMONTE INKER
JOE ROSEN LETTERER
GEORGE ROUSSOS COLORIST
LOUISE JONES EDITOR
JIM SHOOTER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

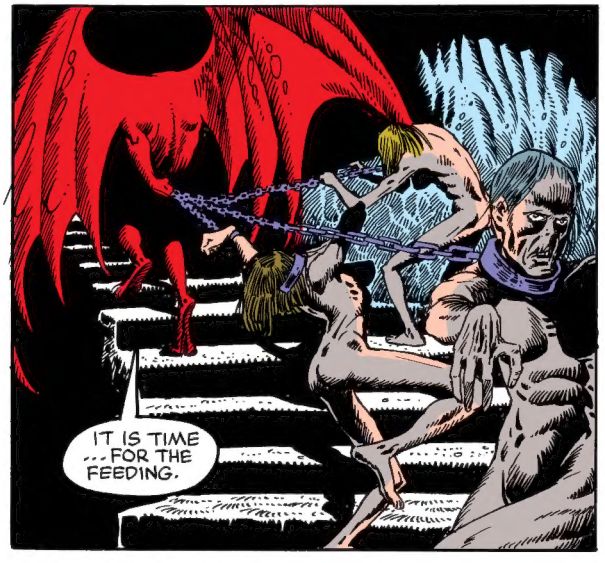
CONAN THE BARBARIAN Published Monthly by MARVEL WORLDWIDE, INC., a subsidiary of MARVEL ENTERTAINMENT, LLC. OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104. Copyright © 2022 Conan Properties International LLC ("CPI"). CONAN, CONAN THE BARBARIAN, HYBORIA, THE SAVAGE SWORD OF CONAN and related logos, characters, names, and distinctive likenesses thereof are trademarks or registered trademarks of CPI. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with those of any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Marvel and its logos are TM Marvel Characters, Inc.

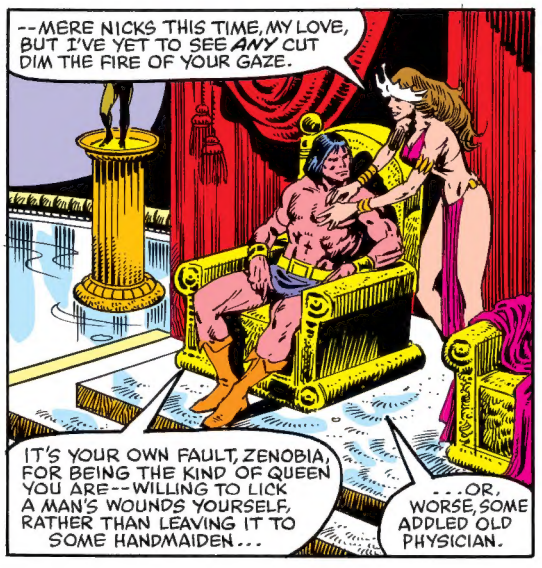

THE THRONGS DISPERSE WITH SCARCELY A MURMUR...
PALLANTIDES--BUSY THE MEN IN CLEANING UP THIS MESS FROM THE UPRISING.
AYE, MY KING.
ALSO, HUNT OUT ANY LAST REBELS WHO MAY STILL BE SKULKING ABOUT THE CITY--AND SEND THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES TO THE PALACE AT ONCE.

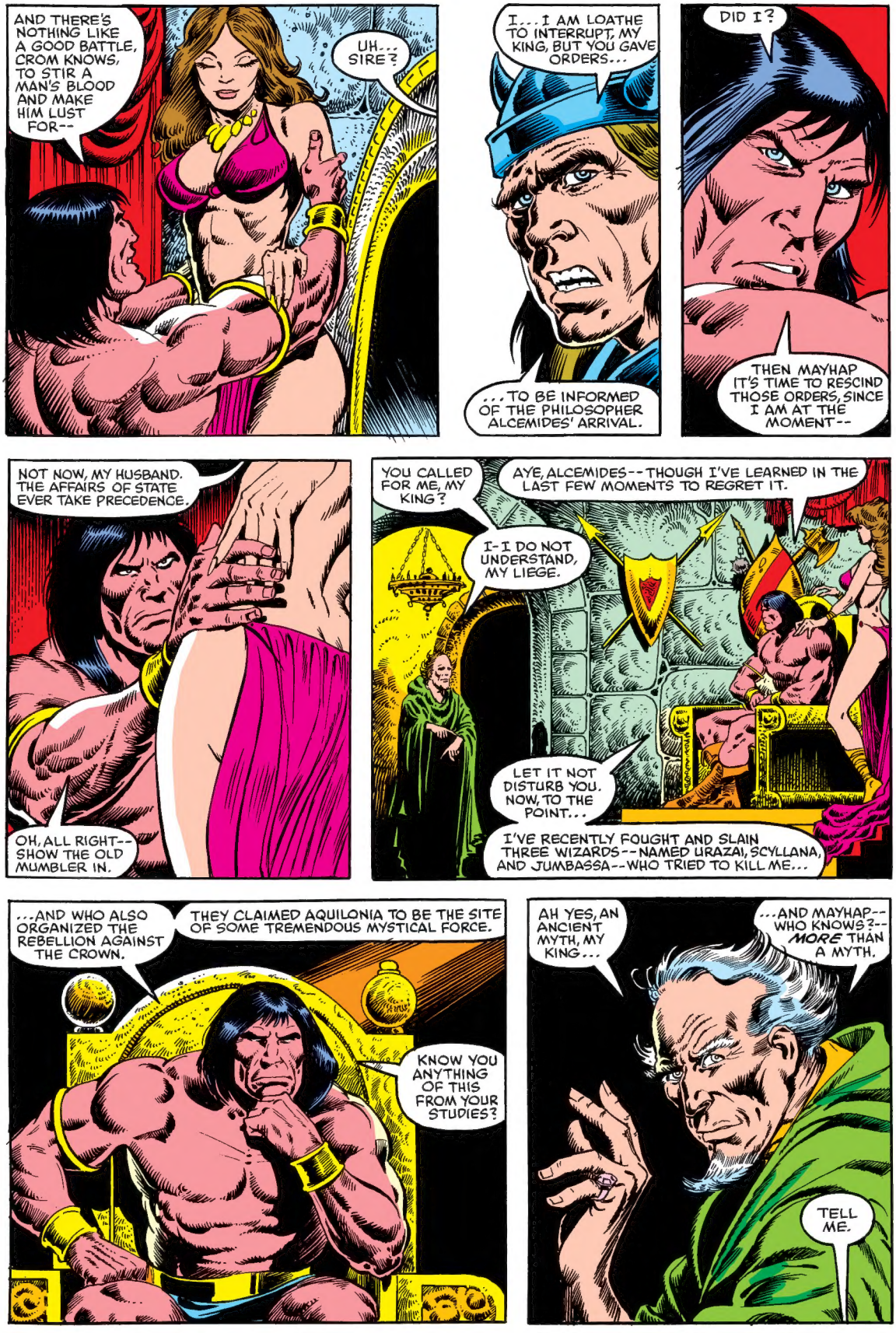
AS FOR US, MY HEIR AND MY QUEEN, IT'S TIME TO LICK OUR WOUNDS... BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE THREATENS THE THRONE.

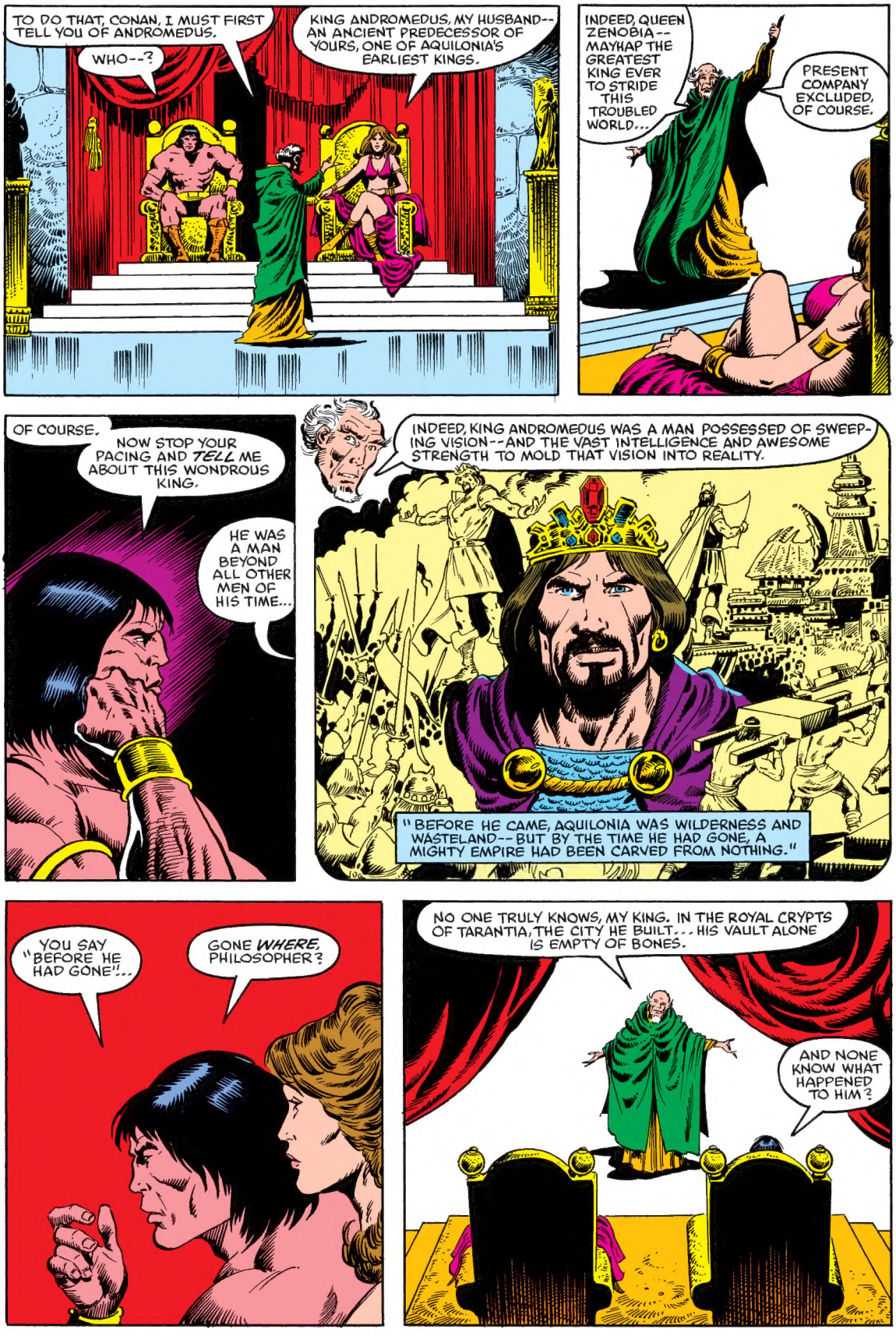

ELSEWHERE, IN MENACE-LADEN GLOOM...
YOU... AND YOU...


...AND YOU.


IT IS TIME ...FOR THE FEEDING.


--MERE NICKS THIS TIME, MY LOVE, BUT I'VE YET TO SEE ANY CUT DIM THE FIRE OF YOUR GAZE.
IT'S YOUR OWN FAULT, ZENOBIA, FOR BEING THE KIND OF QUEEN YOU ARE--WILLING TO LICK A MAN'S WOUNDS YOURSELF, RATHER THAN LEAVING IT TO SOME HANDMAIDEN...
...OR, WORSE, SOME ADDLED OLD PHYSICIAN.


AND THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A GOOD BATTLE, CROM KNOWS, TO STIR A MAN'S BLOOD AND MAKE HIM LUST FOR--
UH... SIRE?
I... I AM LOATHE TO INTERRUPT, MY KING, BUT YOU GAVE ORDERS...
...TO BE INFORMED OF THE PHILOSOPHER ALCEMIDES' ARRIVAL.
DID I?
THEN MAYHAP IT'S TIME TO RESCIND THOSE ORDERS, SINCE I AM AT THE MOMENT--
NOT NOW, MY HUSBAND. THE AFFAIRS OF STATE EVER TAKE PRECEDENCE.
OH, ALL RIGHT-- SHOW THE OLD MUMBLER IN.
YOU CALLED FOR ME, MY KING?
AYE, ALCEMIDES-- THOUGH I'VE LEARNED IN THE LAST FEW MOMENTS TO REGRET IT.
I-I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, MY LIEGE.
LET IT NOT DISTURB YOU. NOW, TO THE POINT...
I'VE RECENTLY FOUGHT AND SLAIN THREE WIZARDS-- NAMED URAZAI, SCYLLANA, AND JUMBASSA-- WHO TRIED TO KILL ME...
...AND WHO ALSO ORGANIZED THE REBELLION AGAINST THE CROWN.
THEY CLAIMED AQUILONIA TO BE THE SITE OF SOME TREMENDOUS MYSTICAL FORCE.
KNOW YOU ANYTHING OF THIS FROM YOUR STUDIES?
AH YES, AN ANCIENT MYTH, MY KING...
...AND MAYHAP-- WHO KNOWS?-- MORE THAN A MYTH.
TELL ME.


TO DO THAT, CONAN, I MUST FIRST TELL YOU OF ANDROMEDUS.
WHO--?
KING ANDROMEDUS, MY HUSBAND--AN ANCIENT PREDECESSOR OF YOURS, ONE OF AQUILONIA'S EARLIEST KINGS.
INDEED, QUEEN ZENOBIA--MAYHAP THE GREATEST KING EVER TO STRIDE THIS TROUBLED WORLD...
PRESENT COMPANY EXCLUDED, OF COURSE.
OF COURSE.
NOW STOP YOUR PACING AND TELL ME ABOUT THIS WONDROUS KING.
HE WAS A MAN BEYOND ALL OTHER MEN OF HIS TIME...
INDEED, KING ANDROMEDUS WAS A MAN POSSESSED OF SWEEPING VISION--AND THE VAST INTELLIGENCE AND AWESOME STRENGTH TO MOLD THAT VISION INTO REALITY.
"BEFORE HE CAME, AQUILONIA WAS WILDERNESS AND WASTELAND--BUT BY THE TIME HE HAD GONE, A MIGHTY EMPIRE HAD BEEN CARVED FROM NOTHING."
YOU SAY "BEFORE HE HAD GONE"!...
GONE WHERE, PHILOSOPHER?
NO ONE TRULY KNOWS, MY KING. IN THE ROYAL CRYPTS OF TARANTIA, THE CITY HE BUILT... HIS VAULT ALONE IS EMPTY OF BONES.
AND NONE KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?

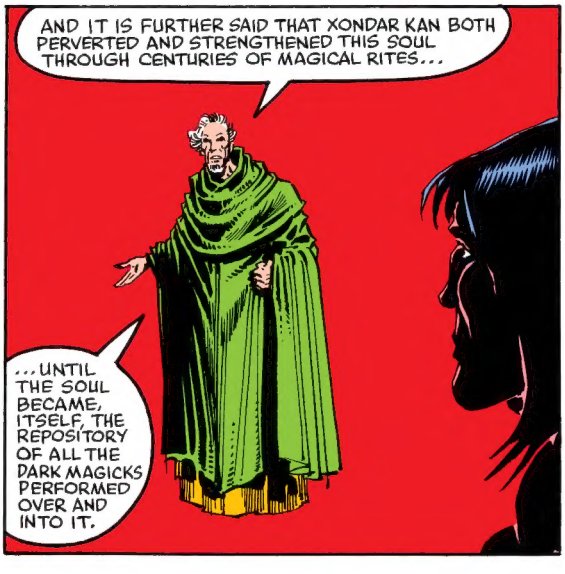
"ALL WE KNOW IS THIS: THAT TROUBLING WORD REACHED HIM, OF DARK POWERS--MAY-HAP SORCERY--WREAKING HAVOC TO THE NEAR SOUTH.
"STRANGE DEATHS--MONSTERS--DEVIL CULTS SPRINGING UP--ALL THREATENING TO UNDERMINE THE GLORIOUS CIVILIZATION HE HAD SO RECENTLY FOUNDED.

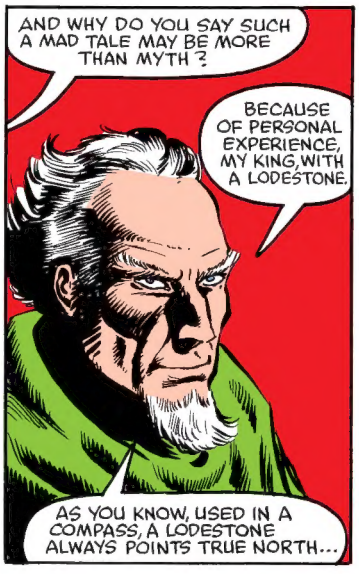
"LIKE YOU, HE WAS NOT A MAN TO DELEGATE DANGER TO OTHERS.
"SO HE ARMED HIMSELF WITH A SILVER-EDGED WAR AXE...

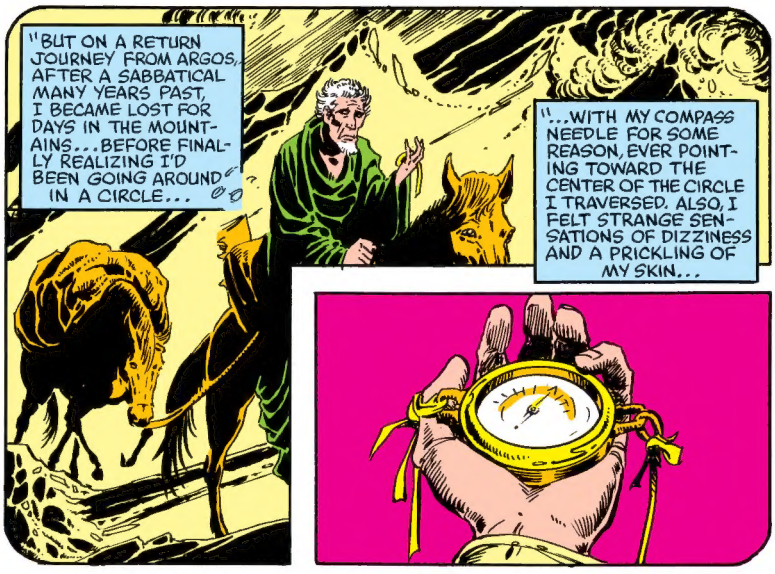
"...AND VENTURED SOUTH WITH A SMALL PARTY OF MEN, TO THE MOUNTAINS ALONG THE KHOROTAS RIVER, NEAR THE VERY HEART OF AQUILONIA."

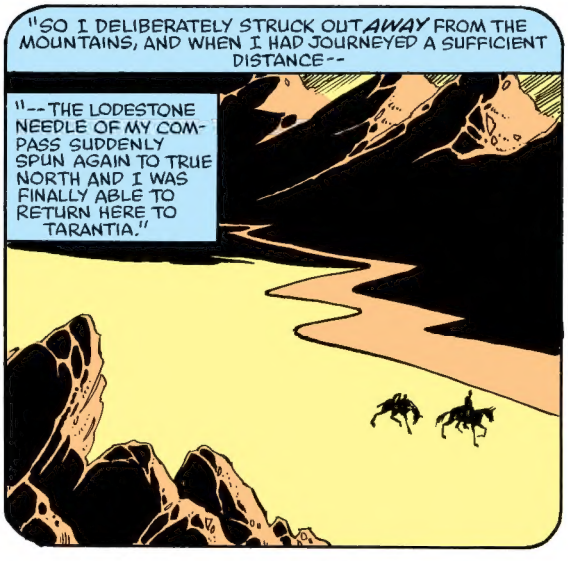
THE KING WAS NEVER SEEN, NOR HEARD FROM, AGAIN. HIS TOMB VAULT LIES EMPTY, A MERE CENOTAPH.
AND HOW DOES THIS CONCERN AQUILONIA BEING THE SOURCE OF SOME SORCEROUS POWER, AS HINTED BY THE WIZARD URAZAI, WHOSE DRAGON NOW LIES IN ASHES OUTSIDE THIS PALACE?
AH...NOW WE COME TO WHAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE MERE MYTH...

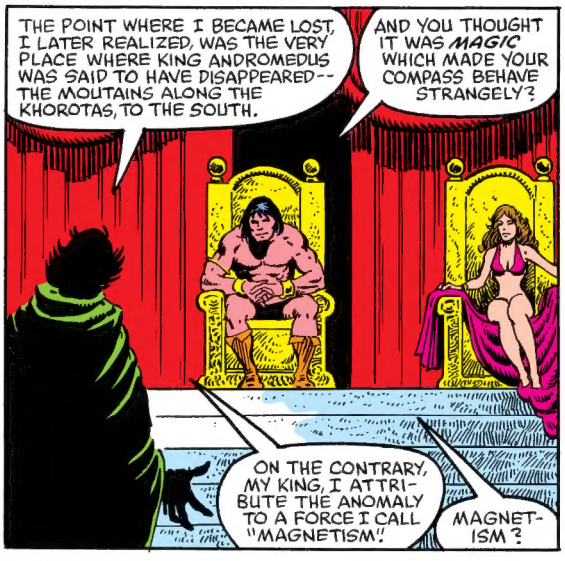
IT IS SAID THAT ANDROMEDUS WAS MET AND CAPTURED BY A SORCERER TO THE SOUTH--A DEVILISH BEING NAMED XONDAR KAN, WHO TORTURED AND ULTIMATELY SLEW ANDROMEDUS...
...BUT WHO THEN MYSTICALLY PRESERVED THE KING'S SOUL, IT BEING A SOURCE OF OVERPOWERING STRENGTH.


AND IT IS FURTHER SAID THAT XONDAR KAN BOTH PERVERTED AND STRENGTHENED THIS SOUL THROUGH CENTURIES OF MAGICAL RITES...
...UNTIL THE SOUL BECAME, ITSELF, THE REPOSITORY OF ALL THE DARK MAGICKS PERFORMED OVER AND INTO IT.


AND WHY DO YOU SAY SUCH A MAD TALE MAY BE MORE THAN MYTH?
BECAUSE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, MY KING, WITH A LODESTONE.
AS YOU KNOW, USED IN A COMPASS, A LODESTONE ALWAYS POINTS TRUE NORTH...


"BUT ON A RETURN JOURNEY FROM ARGOS, AFTER A SABBATICAL MANY YEARS PAST, I BECAME LOST FOR DAYS IN THE MOUNTAINS...BEFORE FINALLY REALIZING I'D BEEN GOING AROUND IN A CIRCLE...
"...WITH MY COMPASS NEEDLE FOR SOME REASON, EVER POINTING TOWARD THE CENTER OF THE CIRCLE I TRAVERSED. ALSO, I FELT STRANGE SENSATIONS OF DIZZINESS AND A PRICKLING OF MY SKIN...


"SO I DELIBERATELY STRUCK OUT *AWAY* FROM THE MOUNTAINS, AND WHEN I HAD JOURNEYED A SUFFICIENT DISTANCE--
"--THE LODESTONE NEEDLE OF MY COMPASS SUDDENLY SPUN AGAIN TO TRUE NORTH AND I WAS FINALLY ABLE TO RETURN HERE TO TARANTIA."

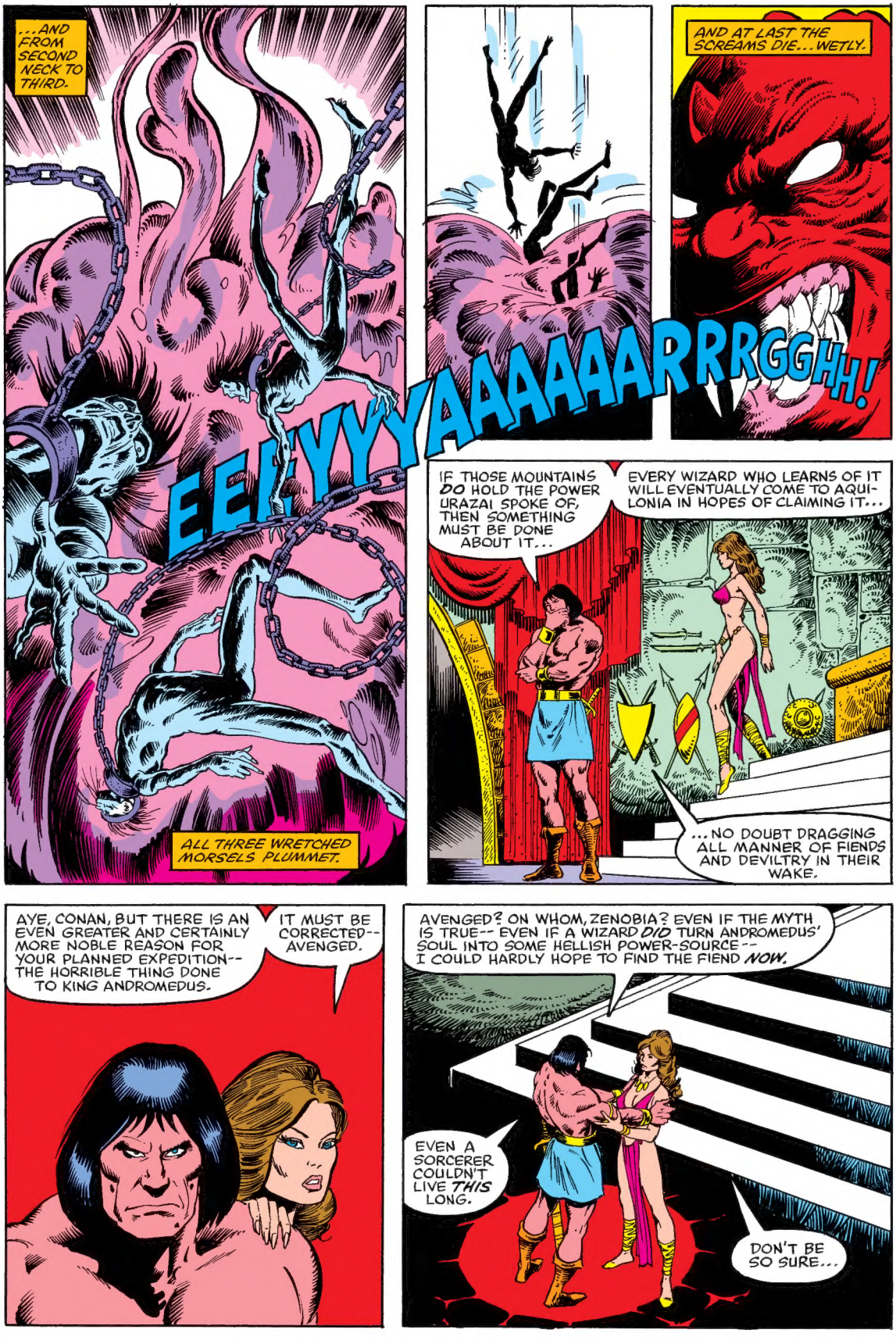

THE POINT WHERE I BECAME LOST, I LATER REALIZED, WAS THE VERY PLACE WHERE KING ANDROMEDUS WAS SAID TO HAVE DISAPPEARED--THE MOUTAINS ALONG THE KHOROTAS, TO THE SOUTH.
AND YOU THOUGHT IT WAS *MAGIC* WHICH MADE YOUR COMPASS BEHAVE STRANGELY?
ON THE CONTRARY, MY KING, I ATTRIBUTE THE ANOMALY TO A FORCE I CALL "MAGNETISM!"
MAGNETISM?

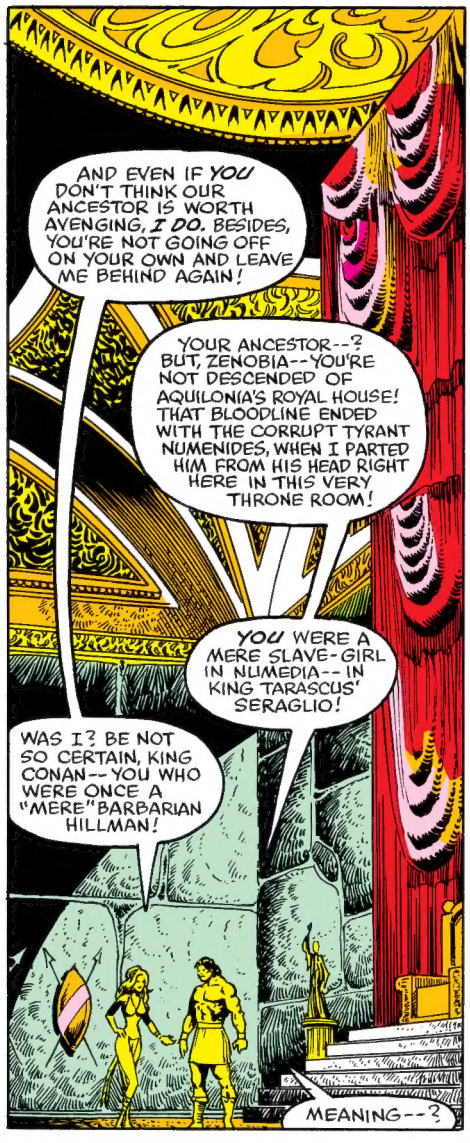
YES, THE VERY POWER OF THE WORLD ITSELF--THE LIFE ESSENCE OF THE LAND AND SEA AND AIR.
I BELIEVE THAT, FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, A SUPREME CONCENTRATION OF MAGNETISM EXISTS AT THE VERY TOP OF THE WORLD...

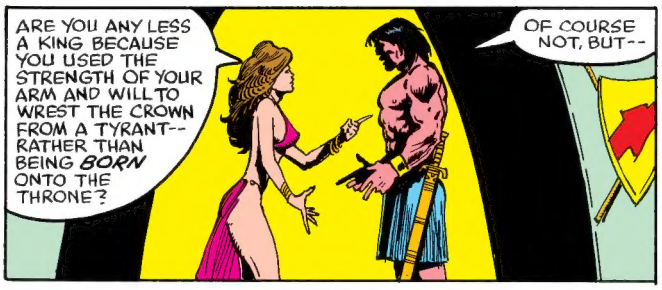
...AND THIS MAGNETIC FORCE ATTRACTS LODESTONE, THUS MAKING COMPASS NEEDLES POINT EVER NORTH.
NOW...IF A LESSER BUT STILL IMMENSELY POWERFUL SOURCE OF MAGNETISM WERE TO EXIST IN THOSE MOUNTAINS TO THE SOUTH OF US--

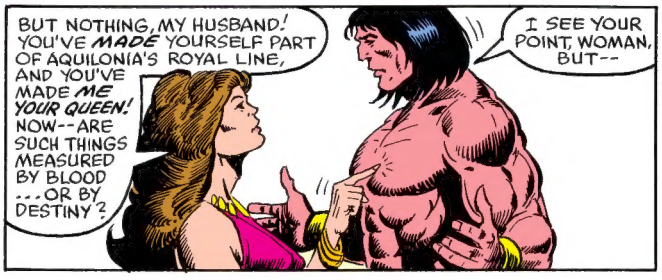
--IT WOULD THEN ACCOUNT FOR MY EXPERIENCE.
ANY COMPASS IN THAT VICINITY WOULD FUNCTION ERRATICALLY.

I SEE... AND DO YOU THINK SORCERERS LIKE URAZAI WOULD LUST AFTER THIS "MAGNETISM"? WOULD THEY HAVE A USE FOR IT? COULD IT SOMEHOW STRENGTHEN THEIR MAGICKS?
WHO KNOWS, MY KING?
IF IT IS, IN TRUTH, THE VERY LIFE ESSENCE OF THE WORLD ITSELF--AS I THEORIZE--THEN ITS CAPACITIES MAY WELL BE UNLIMITED, BUT IF ON THE OTHER HAND--
YES, YES--BUT CAN YOU LEAD ME TO THIS SITE?
WITHOUT A DOUBT, MY KING, BUT I CAN HARDLY PROMISE TO LEAD YOU BACK AGAIN. IF WE SHOULD BECOME LOST, AS I DID THE FIRST TIME, THEN THERE IS NO GUARANTEE WE WILL HAVE THE SAME LUCK IN--
PREPARE YOURSELF FOR AN EXPEDITION, ALCEMIDES, TO DEPART SOON--MAYHAP ON THE MORROW.
Y-YES, MY KING... AS YOU WISH.
AND THE STRANGE PHILOSOPHER SCURRIES FROM THE THRONE ROOM, UNSETTLED BY THE WHIM OF POWER--AND ITS INFLUENCE OVER THE KEEPERS OF THOUGHT.
AGAIN IN GLOOM...
THE THREE CHOSEN ARE DRAGGED TO A HALT AT THE APEX OF A LONG DIZZYING INCLINE.
THERE IS BUT A SINGLE MOMENT TO GAPE IN STRICKEN HORROR AT WHAT AWAITS BELOW.
THEN A KICK, STRETCHING TAUT THE CHAIN FROM FIRST NECK TO SECOND...
THUD


...AND FROM SECOND NECK TO THIRD.
EEEYYYAAAAAARRRGGHH!
AND AT LAST THE SCREAMS DIE...WETLY.
ALL THREE WRETCHED MORSELS PLUMMET.
IF THOSE MOUNTAINS DO HOLD THE POWER URAZAI SPOKE OF, THEN SOMETHING MUST BE DONE ABOUT IT...
EVERY WIZARD WHO LEARNS OF IT WILL EVENTUALLY COME TO AQUILONIA IN HOPES OF CLAIMING IT...
...NO DOUBT DRAGGING ALL MANNER OF FIENDS AND DEVILTRY IN THEIR WAKE.
AYE, CONAN, BUT THERE IS AN EVEN GREATER AND CERTAINLY MORE NOBLE REASON FOR YOUR PLANNED EXPEDITION-- THE HORRIBLE THING DONE TO KING ANDROMEDUS.
IT MUST BE CORRECTED-- AVENGED.
AVENGED? ON WHOM, ZENOBIA? EVEN IF THE MYTH IS TRUE-- EVEN IF A WIZARD DID TURN ANDROMEDUS' SOUL INTO SOME HELLISH POWER-SOURCE-- I COULD HARDLY HOPE TO FIND THE FIEND NOW.
EVEN A SORCERER COULDN'T LIVE THIS LONG.
DON'T BE SO SURE...

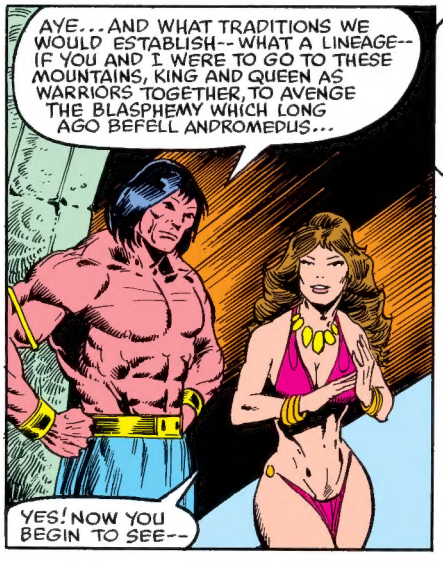

AND EVEN IF YOU DON'T THINK OUR ANCESTOR IS WORTH AVENGING, I DO. BESIDES, YOU'RE NOT GOING OFF ON YOUR OWN AND LEAVE ME BEHIND AGAIN!
YOUR ANCESTOR--? BUT, ZENOBIA--YOU'RE NOT DESCENDED OF AQUILONIA'S ROYAL HOUSE! THAT BLOODLINE ENDED WITH THE CORRUPT TYRANT NUMENIDES, WHEN I PARTED HIM FROM HIS HEAD RIGHT HERE IN THIS VERY THRONE ROOM!
YOU WERE A MERE SLAVE-GIRL IN NUMEDIA--IN KING TARASCUS' SERAGLIO!
WAS I? BE NOT SO CERTAIN, KING CONAN--YOU WHO WERE ONCE A "MERE" BARBARIAN HILLMAN!
MEANING--?

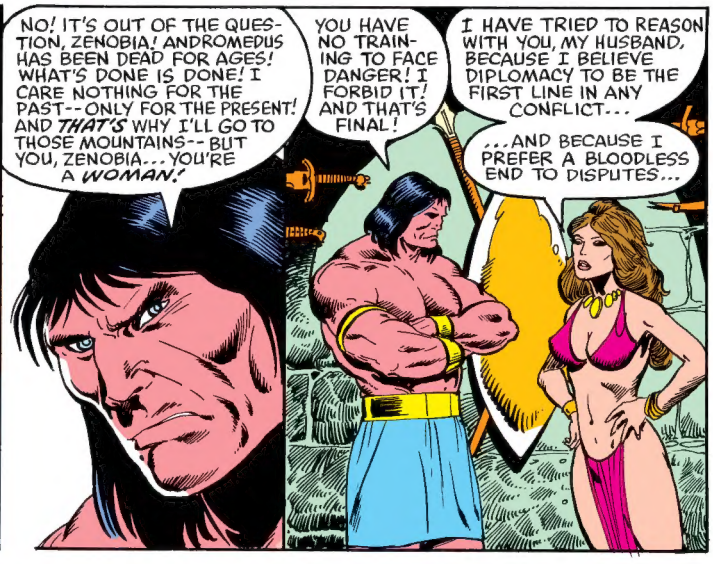

ARE YOU ANY LESS A KING BECAUSE YOU USED THE STRENGTH OF YOUR ARM AND WILL TO WREST THE CROWN FROM A TYRANT--RATHER THAN BEING BORN ONTO THE THRONE?
OF COURSE NOT, BUT--

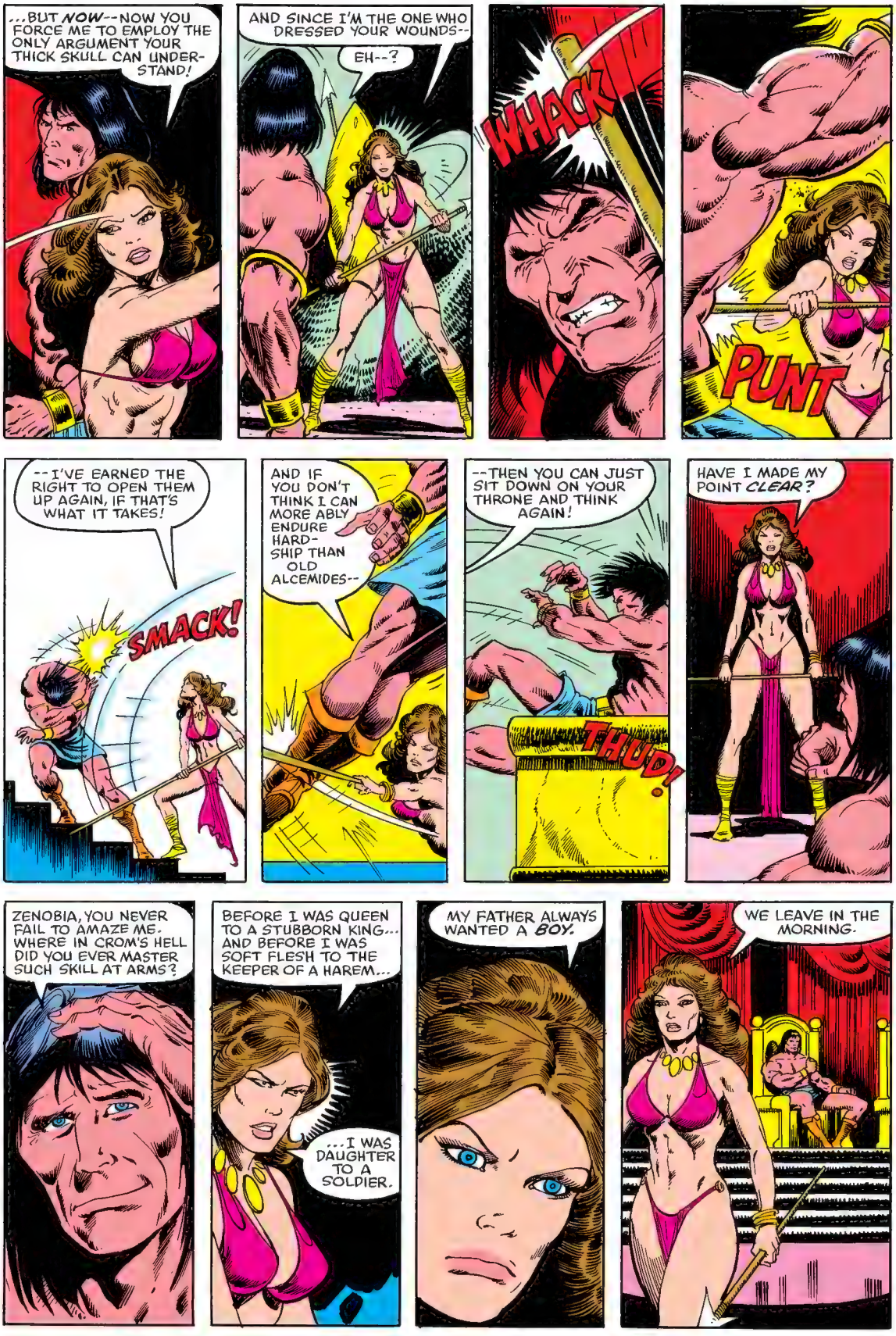

BUT NOTHING, MY HUSBAND! YOU'VE MADE YOURSELF PART OF AQUILONIA'S ROYAL LINE, AND YOU'VE MADE ME YOUR QUEEN! NOW--ARE SUCH THINGS MEASURED BY BLOOD ...OR BY DESTINY?
I SEE YOUR POINT, WOMAN, BUT--

CONAN, WE ARE THE SOVEREIGN ROYALTY OF AQUILONIA, YOU AND I--AND JUST AS OUR SON CONN AND WHATEVER QUEEN HE MAY CHOOSE WILL FOLLOW US, AND UPHOLD THE TRADITIONS OF THE LINE WE HAVE ESTABLISHED--
--SO TOO MUST WE UPHOLD THE ROYAL LINEAGE OF THOSE WE HAVE FOLLOWED!

ANDROMEDUS WAS NO TYRANT LIKE NUMENIDES! HE WAS A GOOD AND COURAGEOUS RULER, THE VERY FOUNDER OF AQUILONIA'S GLORY--
--LONG BEFORE THE BLOODLINE BECAME TAINTED WITH CRUELTY AND COWARDICE!

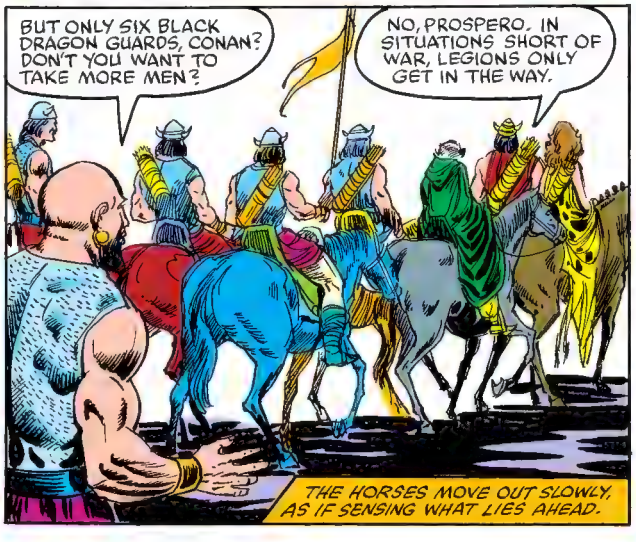

AYE...AND WHAT TRADITIONS WE WOULD ESTABLISH--WHAT A LINEAGE--IF YOU AND I WERE TO GO TO THESE MOUNTAINS, KING AND QUEEN AS WARRIORS TOGETHER, TO AVENGE THE BLASPHEMY WHICH LONG AGO BEFELL ANDROMEDUS...
YES! NOW YOU BEGIN TO SEE--


NO! IT'S OUT OF THE QUESTION, ZENOBIA! ANDROMEDUS HAS BEEN DEAD FOR AGES! WHAT'S DONE IS DONE! I CARE NOTHING FOR THE PAST--ONLY FOR THE PRESENT! AND THAT'S WHY I'LL GO TO THOSE MOUNTAINS--BUT YOU, ZENOBIA...YOU'RE A WOMAN!
YOU HAVE NO TRAINING TO FACE DANGER! I FORBID IT! AND THAT'S FINAL!
I HAVE TRIED TO REASON WITH YOU, MY HUSBAND, BECAUSE I BELIEVE DIPLOMACY TO BE THE FIRST LINE IN ANY CONFLICT...
...AND BECAUSE I PREFER A BLOODLESS END TO DISPUTES...

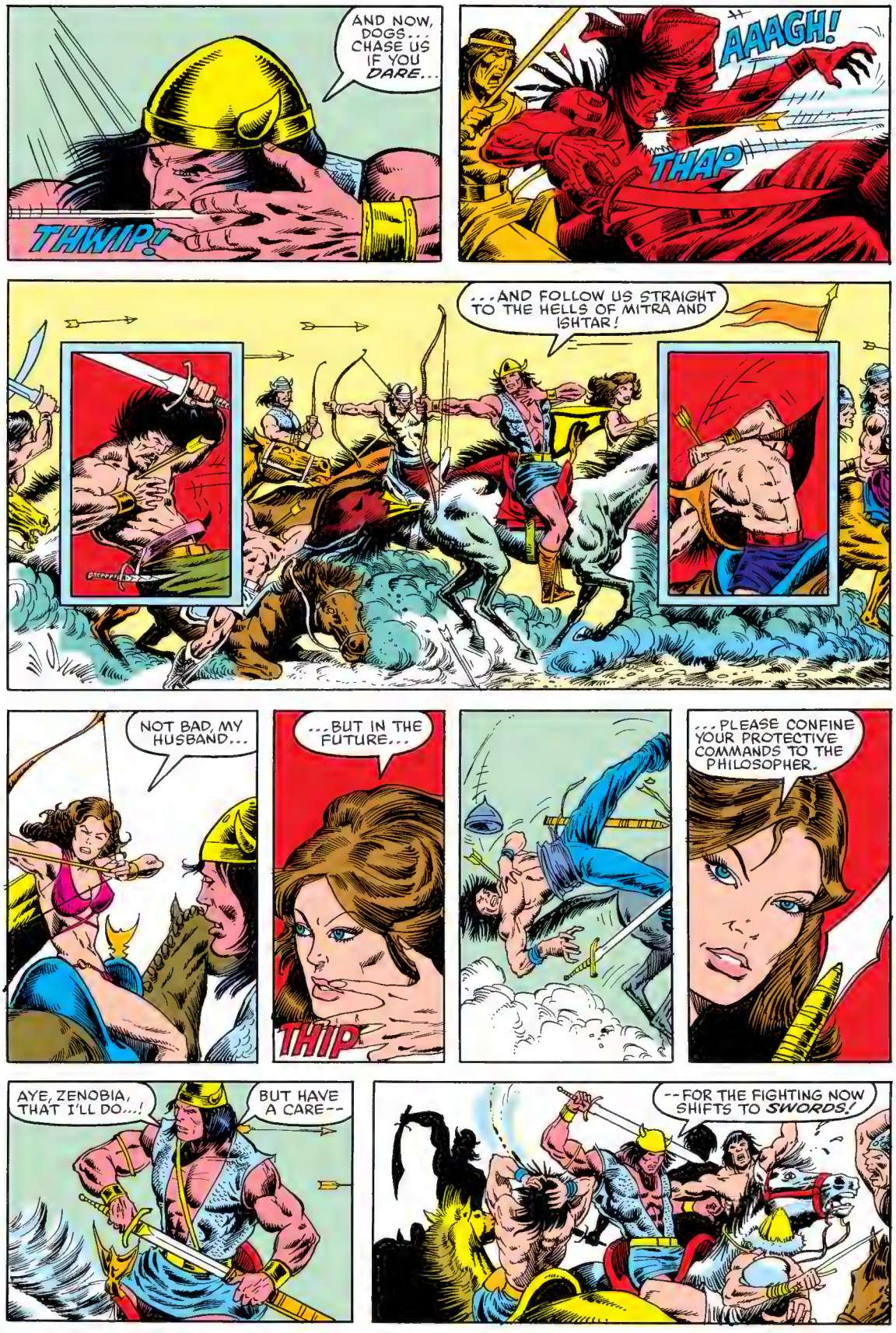

...BUT NOW--NOW YOU FORCE ME TO EMPLOY THE ONLY ARGUMENT YOUR THICK SKULL CAN UNDERSTAND!
AND SINCE I'M THE ONE WHO DRESSED YOUR WOUNDS--
EH--?
WHACK
PUNT
--I'VE EARNED THE RIGHT TO OPEN THEM UP AGAIN, IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES!
SMACK!
AND IF YOU DON'T THINK I CAN MORE ABLY ENDURE HARDSHIP THAN OLD ALCEMIDES--
--THEN YOU CAN JUST SIT DOWN ON YOUR THRONE AND THINK AGAIN!
THUD!
HAVE I MADE MY POINT CLEAR?
ZENOBIA, YOU NEVER FAIL TO AMAZE ME. WHERE IN CROM'S HELL DID YOU EVER MASTER SUCH SKILL AT ARMS?
BEFORE I WAS QUEEN TO A STUBBORN KING... AND BEFORE I WAS SOFT FLESH TO THE KEEPER OF A HAREM...
...I WAS DAUGHTER TO A SOLDIER.
MY FATHER ALWAYS WANTED A BOY.
WE LEAVE IN THE MORNING.

PART II
THE CHILL OF DAWN HAS SCARCELY FADED WHEN THE SMALL EXPEDITIONARY FORCE HALTS AT THE CITY GATES...
PROSPERO AND TROCERO--I'M MAKING YOU JOINT REGENTS, TO RULE THE KINGDOM IN MY AND ZENOBIA'S ABSENCE.
WHAT--?! ZENOBIA IS GOING WITH YOU--?!

IT SEEMS, MY FRIENDS, THAT SHORT OF MAKING MYSELF A GRIEVING WIDOWER...
...I CAN HARDLY STOP HER.

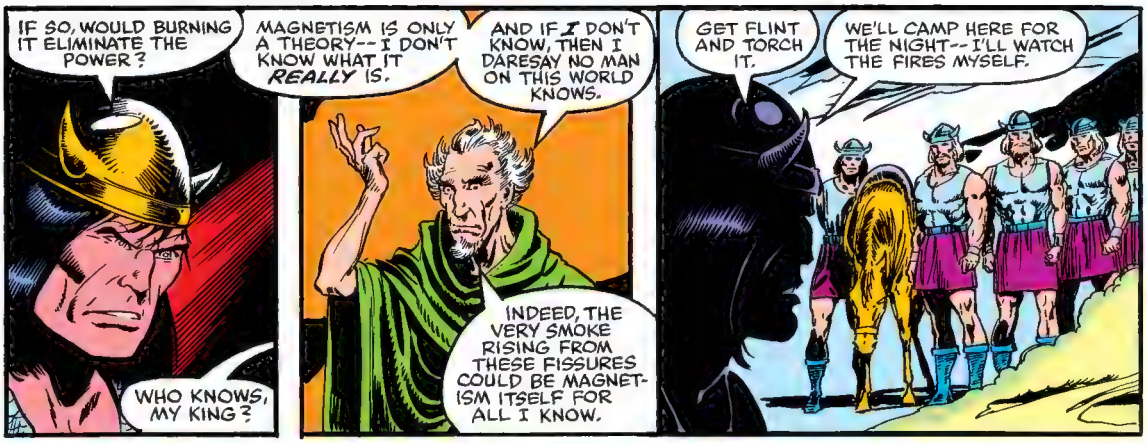

BUT ONLY SIX BLACK DRAGON GUARDS, CONAN? DON'T YOU WANT TO TAKE MORE MEN?
NO, PROSPERO. IN SITUATIONS SHORT OF WAR, LEGIONS ONLY GET IN THE WAY.
THE HORSES MOVE OUT SLOWLY, AS IF SENSING WHAT LIES AHEAD.

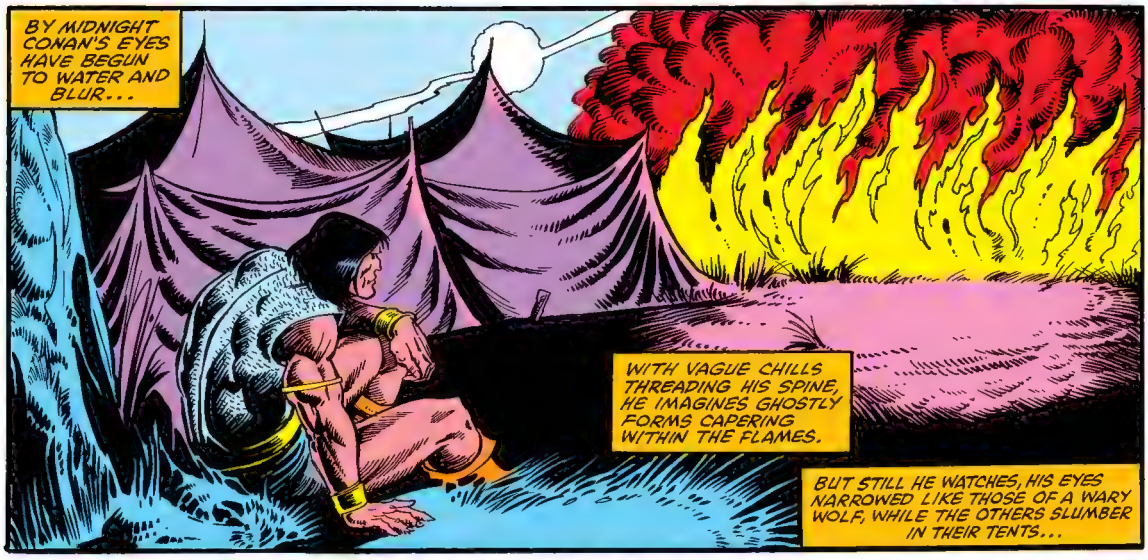
FOR TWO DAYS THEY WEAVE THEIR TRAIL THROUGH FOREST AND OVER WASTELAND...
AND ON THE THIRD DAY...
CONAN--!
AYE--WHEN DID IT LAST RAIN?
TWO DAYS PAST.
THEN JUDGING BY THE AMOUNT OF DUST THERE'S AT LEAST TWENTY OF THEM.
NO HOPE IF WE STAND AND FIGHT...
SO ANY FIGHTING WE DO... WILL BE DONE ON THE RUN!
HEEYAH!
ONCE A HILL BANDIT HIMSELF, CONAN WELL KNOWS THEIR WAYS... AND WHAT THEY'D LIKELY DO TO SUCH A SMALL PARTY, KING AND QUEEN OR NOT.
CROM CURSE THIS HILL COUNTRY--FORCING US INTO A PASS! WE'LL HAVE TO OUTRUN THEM ON A SLANT!
AND IF WE DON'T...!
THEY DO--BUT ONLY BY THUNDERING OUT OF THE PASS JUST BARELY AHEAD OF THE SNARLING PACK.
THEIR MOUNTS ARE FRESHER--THEY'LL OVERTAKE US ON THE OPEN GROUND!
BLACK DRAGONS--I HOPE YOU REMEMBER WHAT I TAUGHT YOU ABOUT FIRING FROM A MOVING STEED!
ZENOBIA AND ALCEMIDES--YOU TWO JUST KEEP RIDING AHEAD OF US!

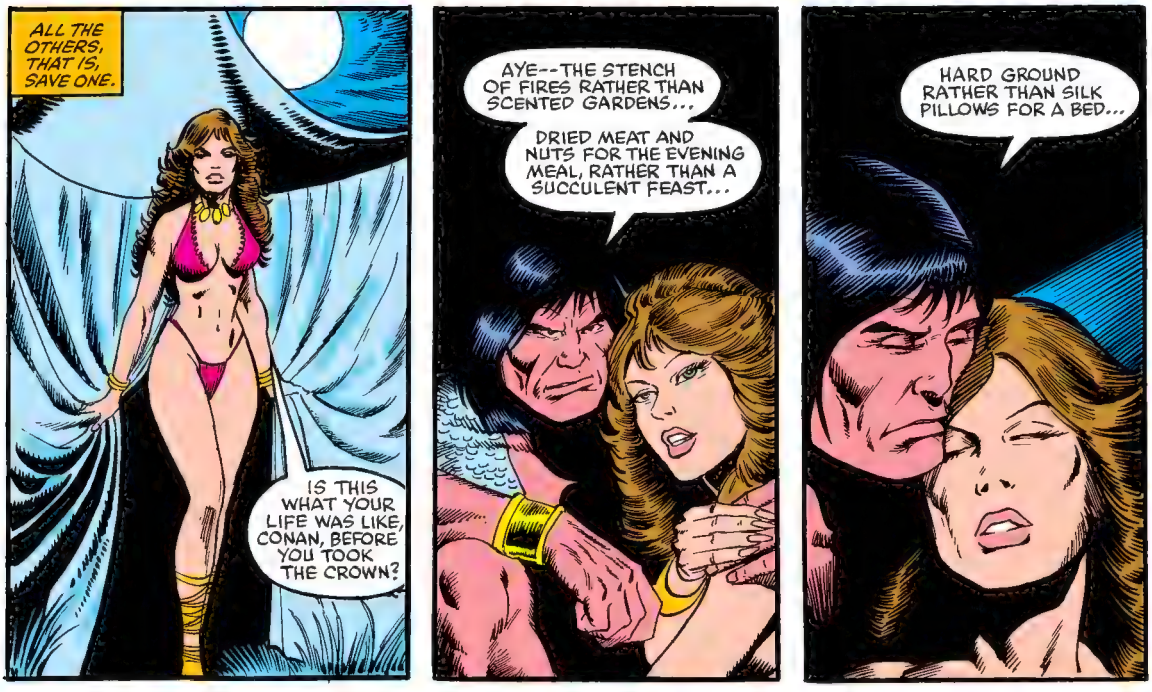

AND NOW, DOGS... CHASE US IF YOU DARE...
THWIP!
AAAGH!
THAP
...AND FOLLOW US STRAIGHT TO THE HELLS OF MITRA AND ISHTAR!
NOT BAD, MY HUSBAND...
...BUT IN THE FUTURE...
THIP
...PLEASE CONFINE YOUR PROTECTIVE COMMANDS TO THE PHILOSOPHER.
AYE, ZENOBIA, THAT I'LL DO...!
BUT HAVE A CARE--
--FOR THE FIGHTING NOW SHIFTS TO SWORDS!

SWORDS, CONAN? I THINK NOT.
I TOLD YOU MY FATHER WAS A SOLDIER...
...BUT HE LED A DIVISION OF ARCHERS.
ZENOBIA!
SPAK
BEHIND YOU!
THE MONARCH HURLS HIS BOW...
...AND NOT A MOMENT...
...TOO SOON!
I DOUBT THE ROYAL HAIRDRESSER WOULD HAVE USED A TULWAR...
...BUT I WAS PLANNING TO HAVE IT CUT.
THEN, QUITE ABRUPTLY...
CONAN! THEY'RE FADING TO A HALT--
--UNWILLING TO GIVE FURTHER CHASE!
AYE, SO THEY ARE, THE CRAVEN DOGS...
BUT WHY--?
THERE, CONAN--THE ANSWER LIES BEFORE US!

THE MOUNTAINS-- THEN AT LEAST THERE'S SOMETHING THOSE JACKALS FEAR...
AND MY COMPASS, MY LIEGE! IF ANYTHING, THE MAGNETIC DISTURBANCE HAS GROWN STRONGER SINCE I WAS LAST HERE.
YOU SEE--? THE NEEDLE POINTS SOUTH--THE VERY OPPOSITE OF ITS TRUE ORIENTATION!
LET'S MOVE ON ALCEMIDES.
AND TELL ME WHEN THE COMPASS GOES WILD AGAIN!
HERE, CONAN, BY THIS FLATTENED PEAK...
THE COMPASS IS SPINNING CRAZILY!
MAYHAP THIS SMOKE--OR WHATEVER LIES IN THE FISSURES--IS CAUSING IT...
OWTCH!
HOT PITCH...
PSSSST!
...AND ENOUGH OF IT TO BURN WELL AND LONG, PERHAPS FOR YEARS--
-- JUST LIKE THE SUBSTANCE WE POURED DOWN THE GRAVES, INTO THE TOMBS UNDER TARANTIA.
AND COULD THIS PITCH BE THE SOURCE OF YOUR "MAGNETISM," ALCEMIDES?
OH, I DOUBT THAT, CONAN--PITCH HAS NEVER BEEN KNOWN TO AFFECT A COMPASS...
BUT THEN AGAIN, PERHAPS IN SUFFICIENTLY MASSIVE AMOUNTS...WELL, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.


IF SO, WOULD BURNING IT ELIMINATE THE POWER?
WHO KNOWS, MY KING?
MAGNETISM IS ONLY A THEORY-- I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT REALLY IS.
AND IF I DON'T KNOW, THEN I DARESAY NO MAN ON THIS WORLD KNOWS.
INDEED, THE VERY SMOKE RISING FROM THESE FISSURES COULD BE MAGNETISM ITSELF FOR ALL I KNOW.
GET FLINT AND TORCH IT.
WE'LL CAMP HERE FOR THE NIGHT-- I'LL WATCH THE FIRES MYSELF.


BY MIDNIGHT CONAN'S EYES HAVE BEGUN TO WATER AND BLUR...
WITH VAGUE CHILLS THREADING HIS SPINE, HE IMAGINES GHOSTLY FORMS CAPERING WITHIN THE FLAMES.
BUT STILL HE WATCHES, HIS EYES NARROWED LIKE THOSE OF A WARY WOLF, WHILE THE OTHERS SLUMBER IN THEIR TENTS...


ALL THE OTHERS, THAT IS, SAVE ONE.
IS THIS WHAT YOUR LIFE WAS LIKE, CONAN, BEFORE YOU TOOK THE CROWN?
AYE--THE STENCH OF FIRES RATHER THAN SCENTED GARDENS...
DRIED MEAT AND NUTS FOR THE EVENING MEAL, RATHER THAN A SUCCULENT FEAST...
HARD GROUND RATHER THAN SILK PILLOWS FOR A BED...

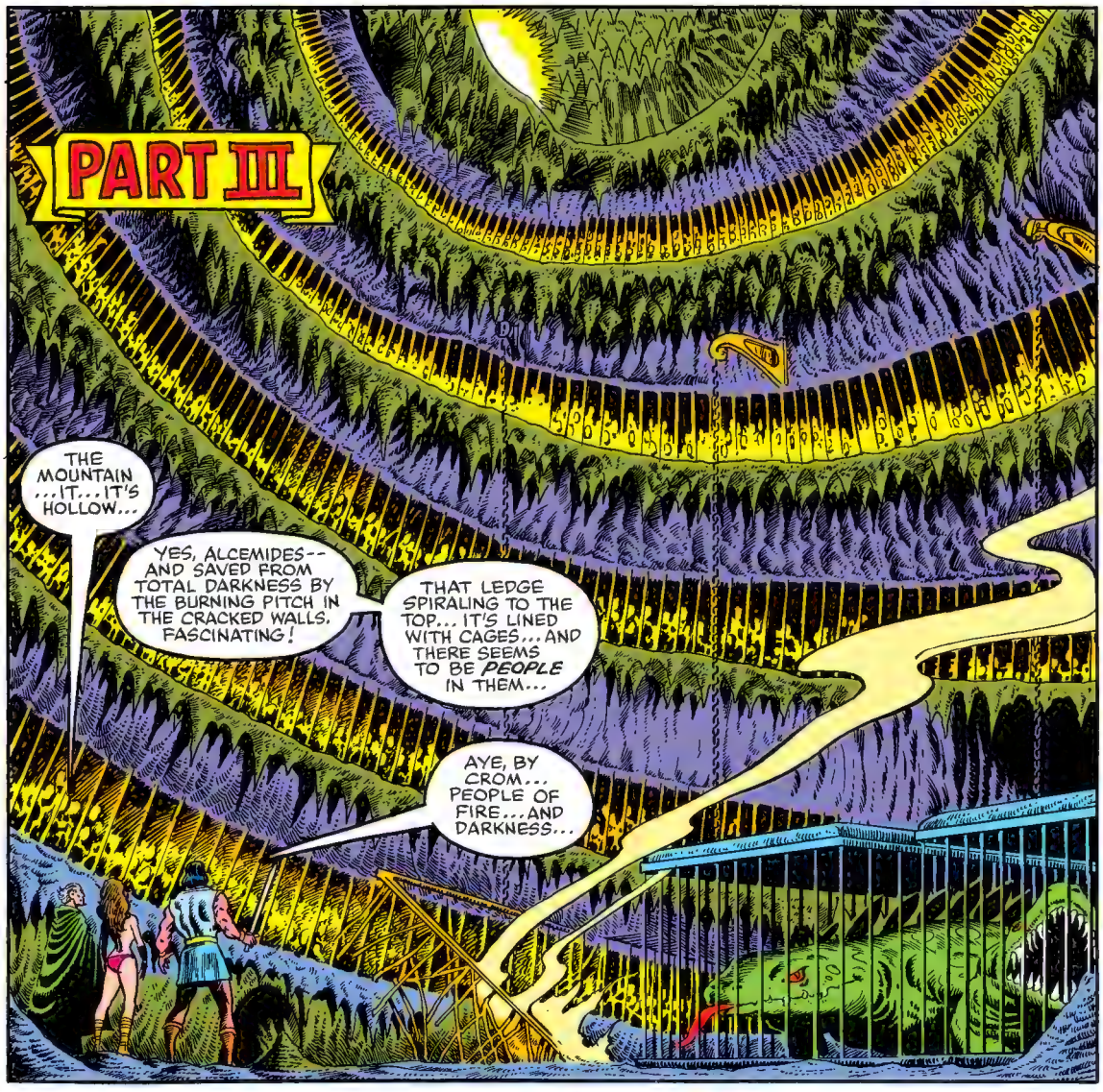
YOU MISS IT, DON'T YOU?
AYE.
THEN LET'S RECAPTURE SOME OF IT, BARBARIAN MAN...
...WHILE WE CAN.
NOW IT IS THE FIRE'S TURN TO WATCH...
AND WHEN IT IS OVER, CONAN DRAPES HER IN HIS CLOAK--
--AND, AGAIN MESMERIZED, HE PACES TOWARD THE FLAMES...
...AS HIS WILD IMAGININGS CROSS THE THRESHOLD OF REALITY.
CROM'S DEVILS! THERE IS SORCERY HERE--!
AND THE FIRE IS BURNING IT RIGHT OUT OF THE VERY GROUND--TO ATTACK ME!

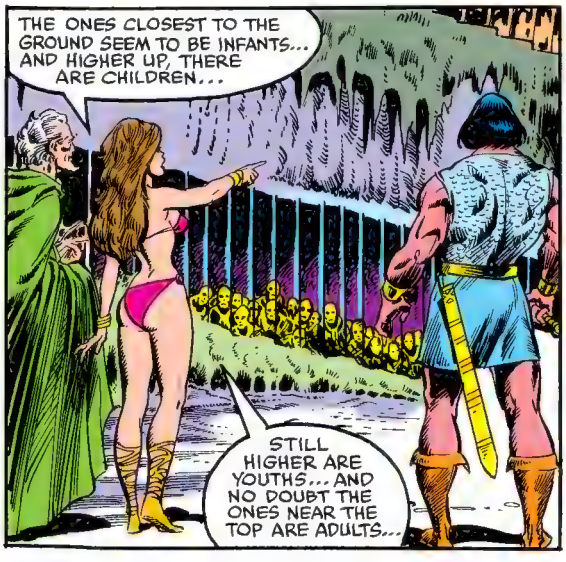
HE SLASHES--
--AND THE DEMON-GHOSTS LAUGH.
SPARE YOUR SWORD, FLESH-MAN! WE ARE BEYOND FEELING!
AFTER THE AGONY OF OUR UNION WITH THE UNDEAD ONE, NO FEELING COULD POSSIBLY TOUCH US-- AND NOW WE HAVE BEEN FREED BY THE FLAMES...
...TO VISIT OUR TORMENT UPON THE WORLD OF THE LIVING!
THEIR LAUGHTER, THEIR BITTER WORDS, TURN HIS BLOOD TO ICE, AND HE IS ABOUT TO CRY OUT FOR HELP...
...WHEN THE GROUND SUDDENLY QUAKES...
...AND THE APPAR-ITIONS, FLOWING INTO FIERCE WINDS, ARE SUCKED BACK TO HELL.
MITRA AND ISHTAR! WHAT--?
THE CRACKING GROUND EXPLODES, SLEWING AND TUMBLING FROM THE BROAD BACK OF A RISING MONSTER, DRIVEN BY THE FLAMES TO A HEIGHT OF RAGE...
RROOAARR
TRUE, THE MENACE IS NOW MORE SUBSTANTIAL...
...BUT HARDLY LESS DANGEROUS, AND ONLY A TRIFLE LESS TERRIFYING.

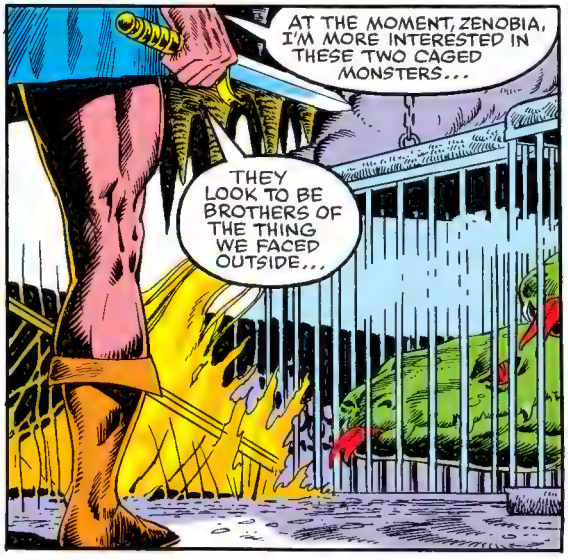
ZENOBIA, ALCEMIDES-- FLEE!
BLACK DRAGONS-- TO ARMS!
THEY STUMBLE FROM THE TENTS, BLADES ALREADY IN HAND--
--BUT NOT YET SURE IF THIS BURNING NIGHTMARE IS STILL A PART OF THEIR DREAMS...
...OR SOME FAR MORE RUDE AND TERRIBLE AWAKENING.
SH-RAK!
INTO THIS CLEFT AT THE BASE OF THE PEAK, ZENOBIA-- AND STAY WITH ALCEMIDES!
THE KING THEN WHIRLS, AS IF TO JOIN THE FRAY--
AAAEEE!!!
--ONLY TO FIND IT ALREADY ENDED.
HE IS IN TIME TO SEE HIS LAST TWO MEN SCREAM THEIR WAY INTO DEATH.

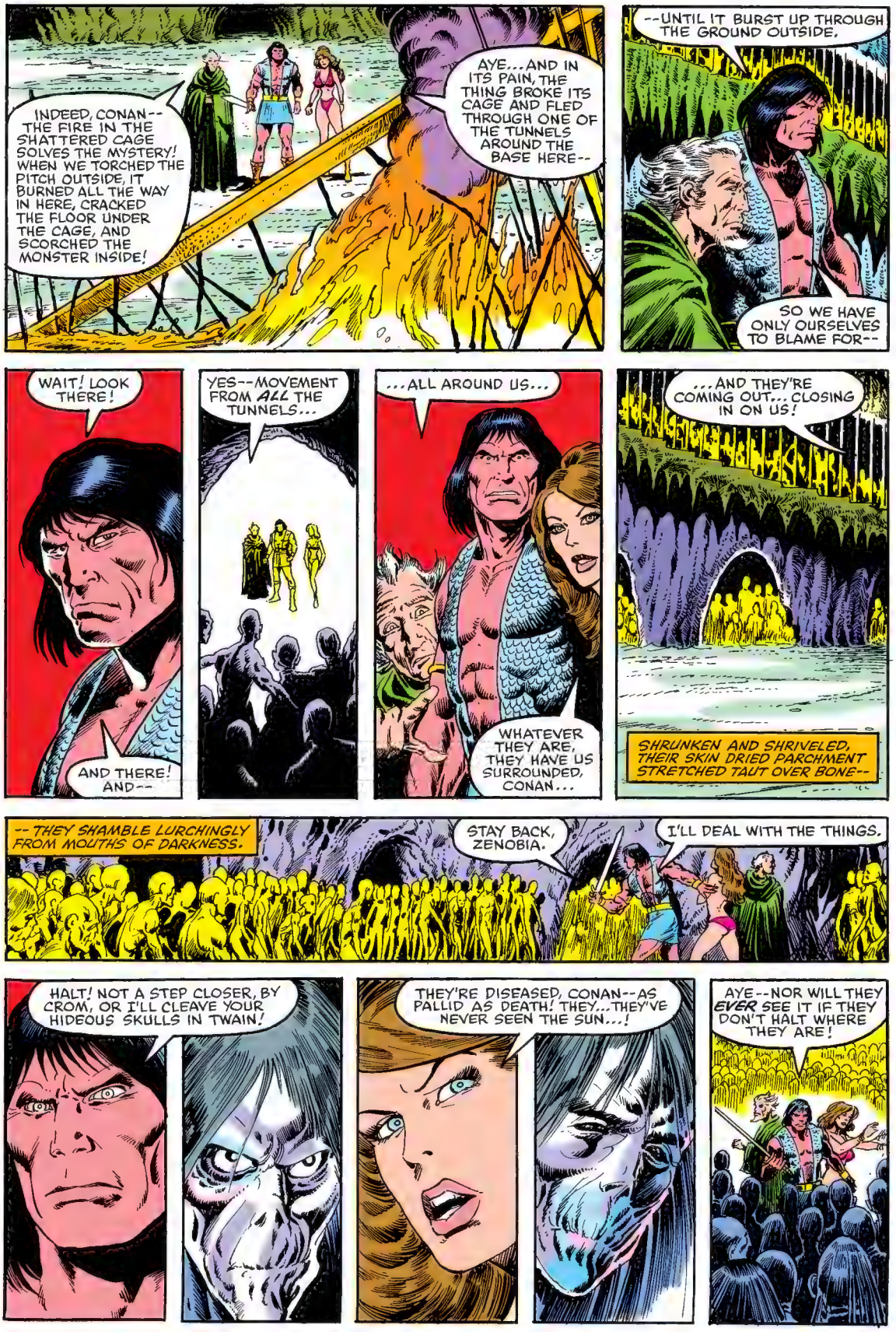
NOOOOOO
THAT'S ALL, BY CROM! WE LEAVE NOW WHILE WE STILL CAN!
NO, CONAN! WE CAN'T LEAVE NOW THAT WE'VE FOUND WHAT WE CAME FOR-- THE SOURCE OF THE SORCERY!
DON'T YOU SEE?! WE CAN'T LEAVE UNTIL WE AVENGE KING ANDROMEDUS!
ANDROMEDUS IS IN HELL, WOMAN-- LEAVE HIM THERE! OR WOULD YOU JOIN HIM IN THE FIRES?! DON'T YOU SEE--?
I CARE NOTHING ABOUT SOME KING WHO PERISHED AGES PAST! I CARE ONLY ABOUT US, ONLY ABOUT THE HERE AND N--
THE LENGTH OF YOUR ARGUMENT HAS ALREADY DECIDED THE ISSUE-- IT'S TOO LATE TO FLEE!
HHSSSS
AYE, AGED ONE-- IT'S TRAPPED US HERE IN THE CLEFT...
BUT BY CROM, ITS MOUTH WILL TASTE MORE THAN ONE STING--
-- BEFORE IT SETTLES ON ITS MEAL!
CHOMP!
MITRA!

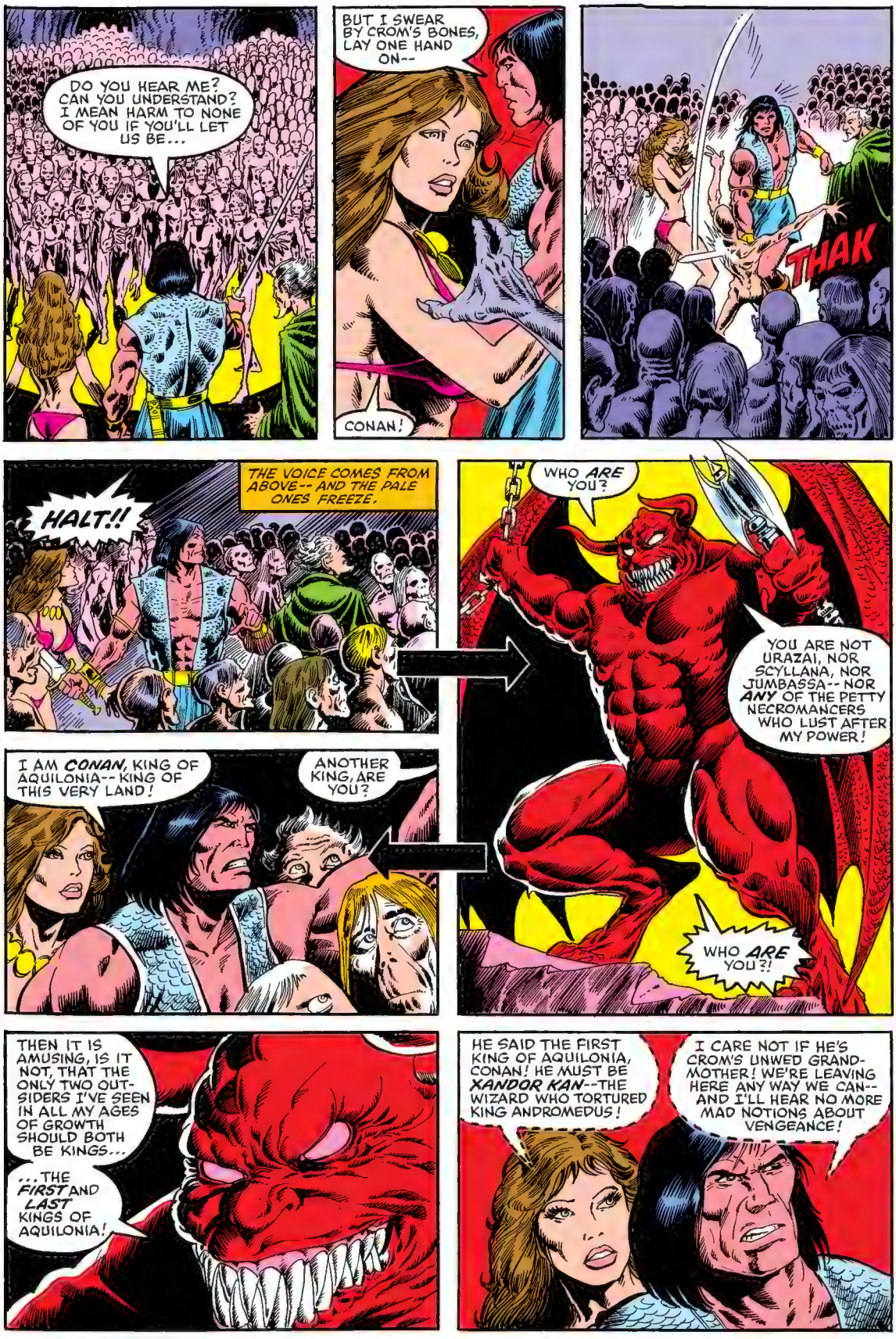
DIE, MONSTER!
WHY WON'T YOU--
ANOTHER QUAKE!
KKRBOOOOOM
--DIE?!
IT'S OPENING THE CLEFT INTO A TUNNEL--A PASSAGE-WAY INTO THE HEART OF THE MOUNTAIN!
IF WE WERE TO FOLLOW IT--
YES, MY QUEEN...
IT MAY BE OUR ONLY CHANCE FOR ESCAPE FROM THE MONSTER!
COME, CONAN--QUICKLY!
AT LEAST OUR WAY IS LIT BY THE FLICKERING FIRES...
AYE--JUST HAVE A CARE WHERE YOU STEP.
QUIETLY NOW--THERE'S A CIRCLE OF GREATER LIGHT AHEAD. LET'S SEE WHAT IT IS...

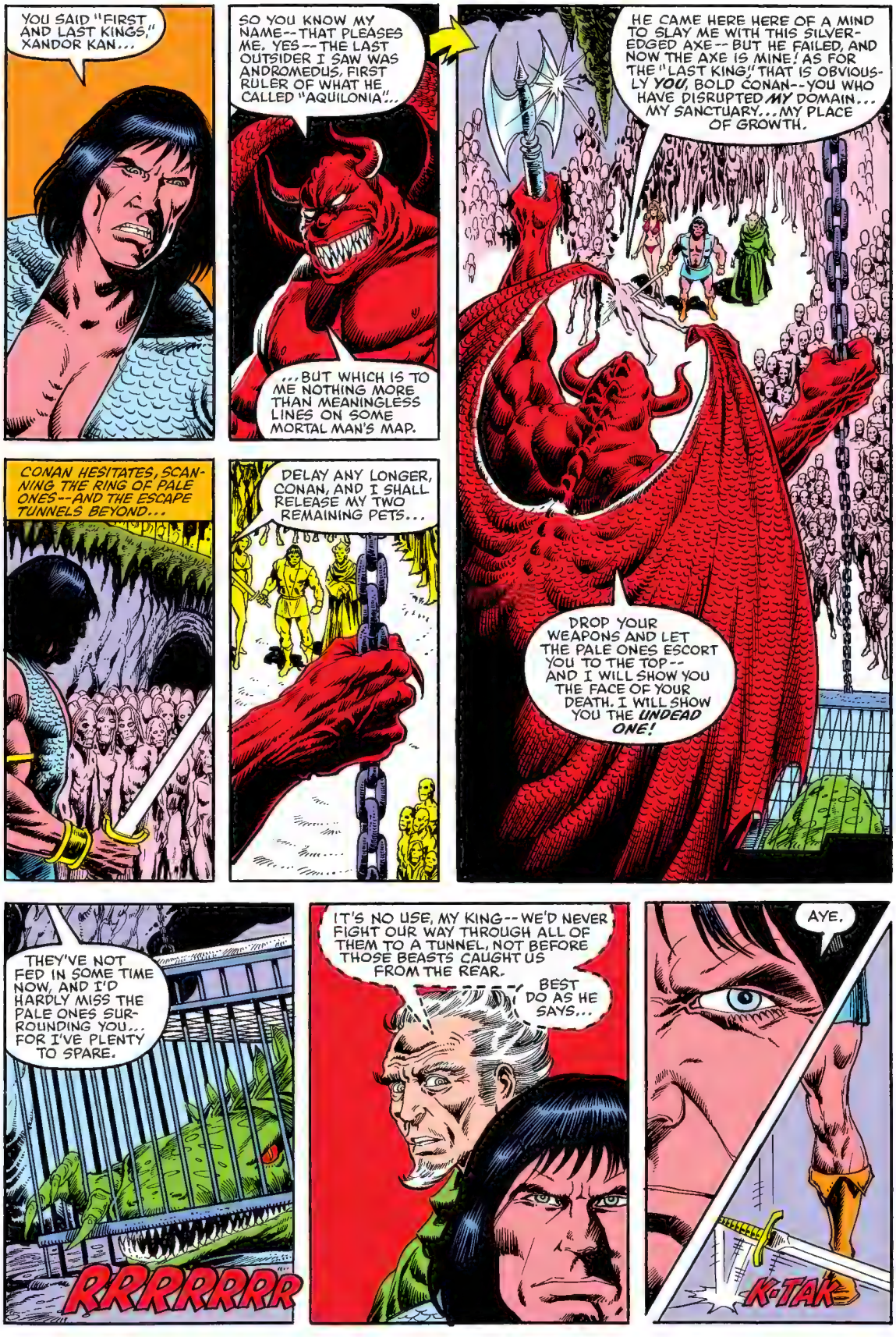

PART III
THE MOUNTAIN ...IT... IT'S HOLLOW...
YES, ALCEMIDES-- AND SAVED FROM TOTAL DARKNESS BY THE BURNING PITCH IN THE CRACKED WALLS. FASCINATING!
THAT LEDGE SPIRALING TO THE TOP... IT'S LINED WITH CAGES... AND THERE SEEMS TO BE PEOPLE IN THEM...
AYE, BY CROM... PEOPLE OF FIRE... AND DARKNESS...

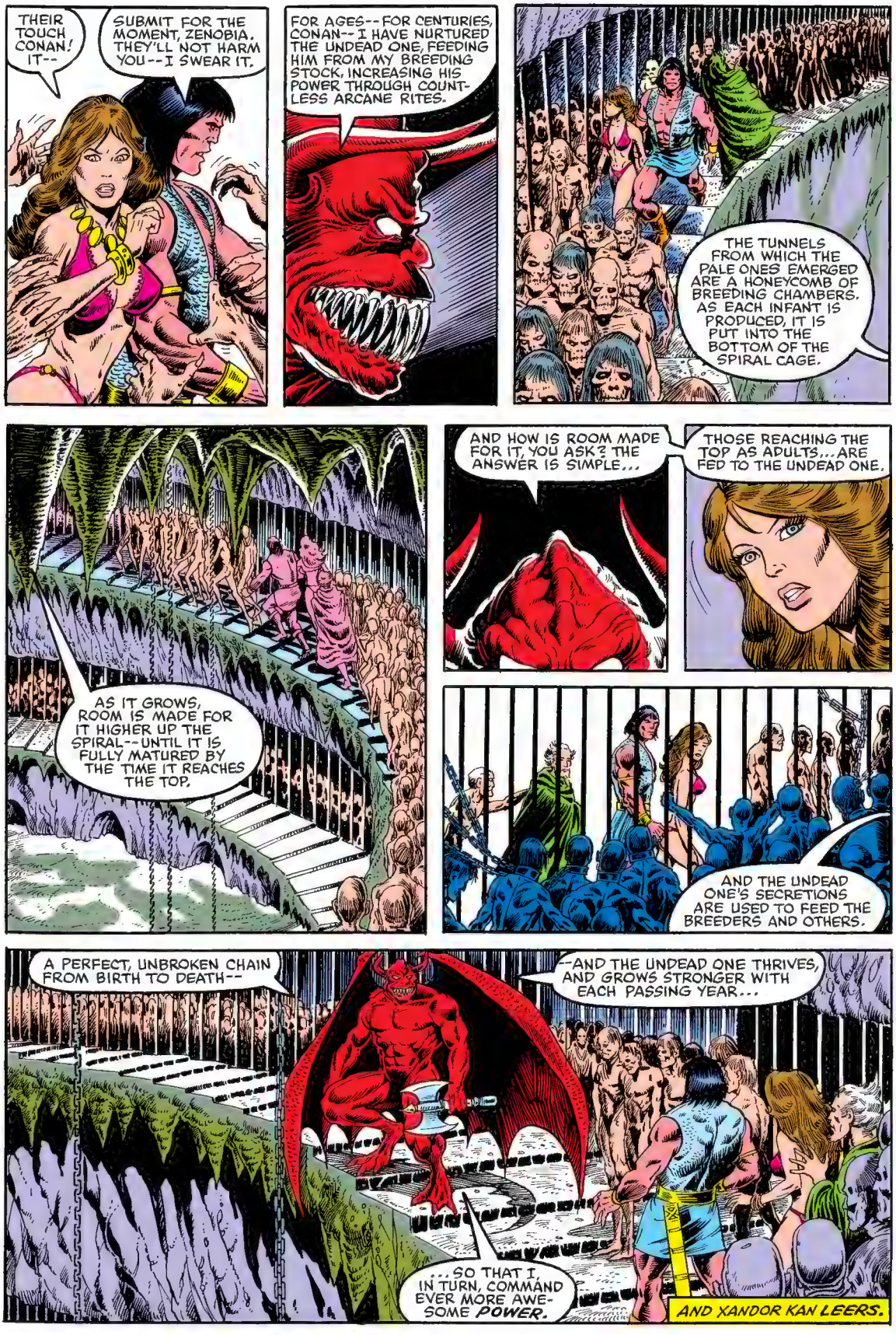

THE ONES CLOSEST TO THE GROUND SEEM TO BE INFANTS... AND HIGHER UP, THERE ARE CHILDREN...
STILL HIGHER ARE YOUTHS... AND NO DOUBT THE ONES NEAR THE TOP ARE ADULTS...


AT THE MOMENT, ZENOBIA, I'M MORE INTERESTED IN THESE TWO CAGED MONSTERS...
THEY LOOK TO BE BROTHERS OF THE THING WE FACED OUTSIDE...

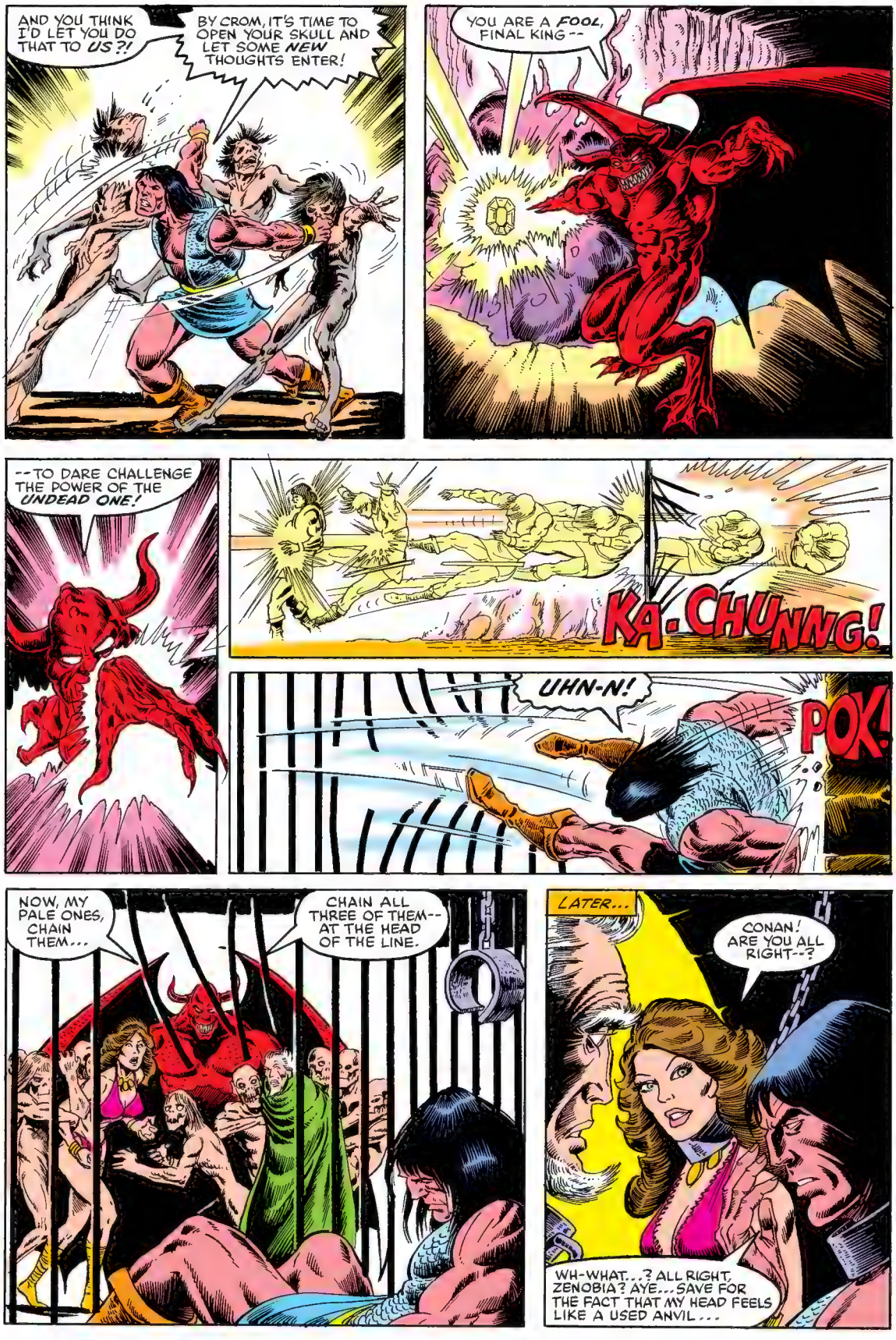

INDEED, CONAN--THE FIRE IN THE SHATTERED CAGE SOLVES THE MYSTERY! WHEN WE TORCHED THE PITCH OUTSIDE, IT BURNED ALL THE WAY IN HERE, CRACKED THE FLOOR UNDER THE CAGE, AND SCORCHED THE MONSTER INSIDE!
AYE...AND IN ITS PAIN, THE THING BROKE ITS CAGE AND FLED THROUGH ONE OF THE TUNNELS AROUND THE BASE HERE--
--UNTIL IT BURST UP THROUGH THE GROUND OUTSIDE.
SO WE HAVE ONLY OURSELVES TO BLAME FOR--
WAIT! LOOK THERE!
AND THERE! AND--
YES--MOVEMENT FROM ALL THE TUNNELS...
...ALL AROUND US...
WHATEVER THEY ARE, THEY HAVE US SURROUNDED, CONAN...
...AND THEY'RE COMING OUT...CLOSING IN ON US!
SHRUNKEN AND SHRIVELED, THEIR SKIN DRIED PARCHMENT STRETCHED TAUT OVER BONE--
--THEY SHAMBLE LURCHINGLY FROM MOUTHS OF DARKNESS.
STAY BACK, ZENOBIA.
I'LL DEAL WITH THE THINGS.
HALT! NOT A STEP CLOSER, BY CROM, OR I'LL CLEAVE YOUR HIDEOUS SKULLS IN TWAIN!
THEY'RE DISEASED, CONAN--AS PALLID AS DEATH! THEY...THEY'VE NEVER SEEN THE SUN...!
AYE--NOR WILL THEY EVER SEE IT IF THEY DON'T HALT WHERE THEY ARE!


DO YOU HEAR ME? CAN YOU UNDERSTAND? I MEAN HARM TO NONE OF YOU IF YOU'LL LET US BE...
BUT I SWEAR BY CROM'S BONES, LAY ONE HAND ON--
CONAN!
THAK
THE VOICE COMES FROM ABOVE-- AND THE PALE ONES FREEZE.
HALT!!
WHO ARE YOU?
YOU ARE NOT URAZAI, NOR SCYLLANA, NOR JUMBASSA-- NOR ANY OF THE PETTY NECROMANCERS WHO LUST AFTER MY POWER!
I AM CONAN, KING OF AQUILONIA-- KING OF THIS VERY LAND!
ANOTHER KING, ARE YOU?
WHO ARE YOU?!
THEN IT IS AMUSING, IS IT NOT, THAT THE ONLY TWO OUTSIDERS I'VE SEEN IN ALL MY AGES OF GROWTH SHOULD BOTH BE KINGS...
...THE FIRST AND LAST KINGS OF AQUILONIA!
HE SAID THE FIRST KING OF AQUILONIA, CONAN! HE MUST BE XANDOR KAN--THE WIZARD WHO TORTURED KING ANDROMEDUS!
I CARE NOT IF HE'S CROM'S UNWED GRANDMOTHER! WE'RE LEAVING HERE ANY WAY WE CAN-- AND I'LL HEAR NO MORE MAD NOTIONS ABOUT VENGEANCE!


YOU SAID "FIRST AND LAST KINGS," XANDOR KAN...
SO YOU KNOW MY NAME--THAT PLEASES ME. YES--THE LAST OUTSIDER I SAW WAS ANDROMEDUS, FIRST RULER OF WHAT HE CALLED "AQUILONIA"...
...BUT WHICH IS TO ME NOTHING MORE THAN MEANINGLESS LINES ON SOME MORTAL MAN'S MAP.
HE CAME HERE HERE OF A MIND TO SLAY ME WITH THIS SILVER-EDGED AXE--BUT HE FAILED, AND NOW THE AXE IS MINE! AS FOR THE "LAST KING" THAT IS OBVIOUSLY YOU, BOLD CONAN--YOU WHO HAVE DISRUPTED MY DOMAIN... MY SANCTUARY... MY PLACE OF GROWTH.
DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND LET THE PALE ONES ESCORT YOU TO THE TOP--AND I WILL SHOW YOU THE FACE OF YOUR DEATH. I WILL SHOW YOU THE UNDEAD ONE!
CONAN HESITATES, SCANNING THE RING OF PALE ONES--AND THE ESCAPE TUNNELS BEYOND...
DELAY ANY LONGER, CONAN, AND I SHALL RELEASE MY TWO REMAINING PETS...
THEY'VE NOT FED IN SOME TIME NOW, AND I'D HARDLY MISS THE PALE ONES SURROUNDING YOU... FOR I'VE PLENTY TO SPARE.
RRRRRRR
IT'S NO USE, MY KING--WE'D NEVER FIGHT OUR WAY THROUGH ALL OF THEM TO A TUNNEL, NOT BEFORE THOSE BEASTS CAUGHT US FROM THE REAR.
BEST DO AS HE SAYS...
AYE.
K-TAK

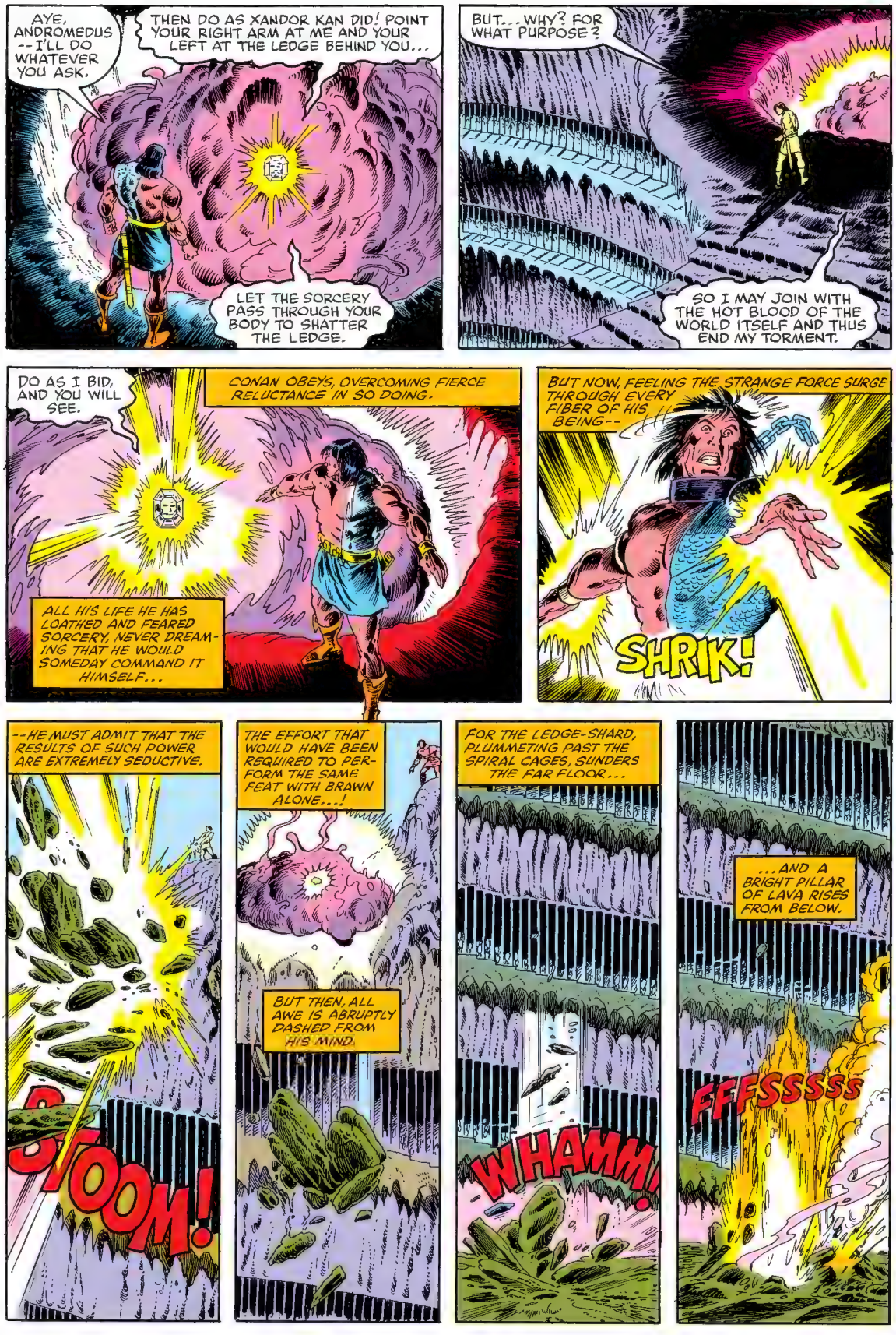

THEIR TOUCH CONAN! IT--
SUBMIT FOR THE MOMENT, ZENOBIA. THEY'LL NOT HARM YOU--I SWEAR IT.
FOR AGES--FOR CENTURIES, CONAN--I HAVE NURTURED THE UNDEAD ONE, FEEDING HIM FROM MY BREEDING STOCK, INCREASING HIS POWER THROUGH COUNTLESS ARCANE RITES.
THE TUNNELS FROM WHICH THE PALE ONES EMERGED ARE A HONEYCOMB OF BREEDING CHAMBERS. AS EACH INFANT IS PRODUCED, IT IS PUT INTO THE BOTTOM OF THE SPIRAL CAGE.
AS IT GROWS, ROOM IS MADE FOR IT HIGHER UP THE SPIRAL--UNTIL IT IS FULLY MATURED BY THE TIME IT REACHES THE TOP.
AND HOW IS ROOM MADE FOR IT, YOU ASK? THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE...
THOSE REACHING THE TOP AS ADULTS...ARE FED TO THE UNDEAD ONE.
AND THE UNDEAD ONE'S SECRETIONS ARE USED TO FEED THE BREEDERS AND OTHERS.
A PERFECT, UNBROKEN CHAIN FROM BIRTH TO DEATH--
--AND THE UNDEAD ONE THRIVES, AND GROWS STRONGER WITH EACH PASSING YEAR...
...SO THAT I, IN TURN, COMMAND EVER MORE AWESOME POWER.
AND XANDOR KAN LEERS.

ONE DAY THE UNDEAD ONE WILL HAVE ALL THE POWER I NEED--
--AND I SHALL EMERGE AT LAST FROM MY MOUNTAIN FASTNESS TO ENSLAVE AND COMMAND EVERY MAGE AND SHAMAN IN THE WORLD...
...AND THEN SHALL ALL THE MIGHTY NATIONS FALL TO MY ARMY...THEN SHALL THE WORLD BE CONQUERED IN FIRE AND DARKNESS!
AND THAT DAY WILL COME PERHAPS EVEN SOONER THAN I DREAMED, CONAN-- PERHAPS AS SOON AS THE UNDEAD ONE FEASTS UPON THE STRENGTH OF YOUR HEART, FINAL KING OF AQUILONIA!
YOU MEAN TO... TO FEED US... TO THIS...THIS THING?!
ON THE MORROW, FINAL KING, IN WHAT MAY WELL BE ITS FINAL RITE OF FEEDING.
TONIGHT, WHEN I JOIN WITH IT TO RENEW MYSELF... I WILL KNOW WHETHER ITS POWER IS COMPLETE AND READY TO BE UNLEASHED.
FOR NOW, I SHALL LET YOU WITNESS WHAT AWAITS YOU.
ALL OF YOU.
THE THREE ARE UN-SHACKLED AND DRAGGED TO THE EDGE OF THE PIT.
IT IS TIME...
AAEEE
...FOR THE UNDEAD ONE'S FEEDING.
THE FLESH IS ABSORBED WITHIN MOMENTS...
...AND THE PULSATING MASS GLOWS BRIGHTER.


AND YOU THINK I'D LET YOU DO THAT TO US?!
BY CROM, IT'S TIME TO OPEN YOUR SKULL AND LET SOME NEW THOUGHTS ENTER!
YOU ARE A FOOL, FINAL KING--
--TO DARE CHALLENGE THE POWER OF THE UNDEAD ONE!
KA-CHUNNG!
UHN-N!
POK!
NOW, MY PALE ONES, CHAIN THEM...
CHAIN ALL THREE OF THEM--AT THE HEAD OF THE LINE.
LATER...
CONAN! ARE YOU ALL RIGHT--?
WH-WHAT...? ALL RIGHT, ZENOBIA? AYE... SAVE FOR THE FACT THAT MY HEAD FEELS LIKE A USED ANVIL...

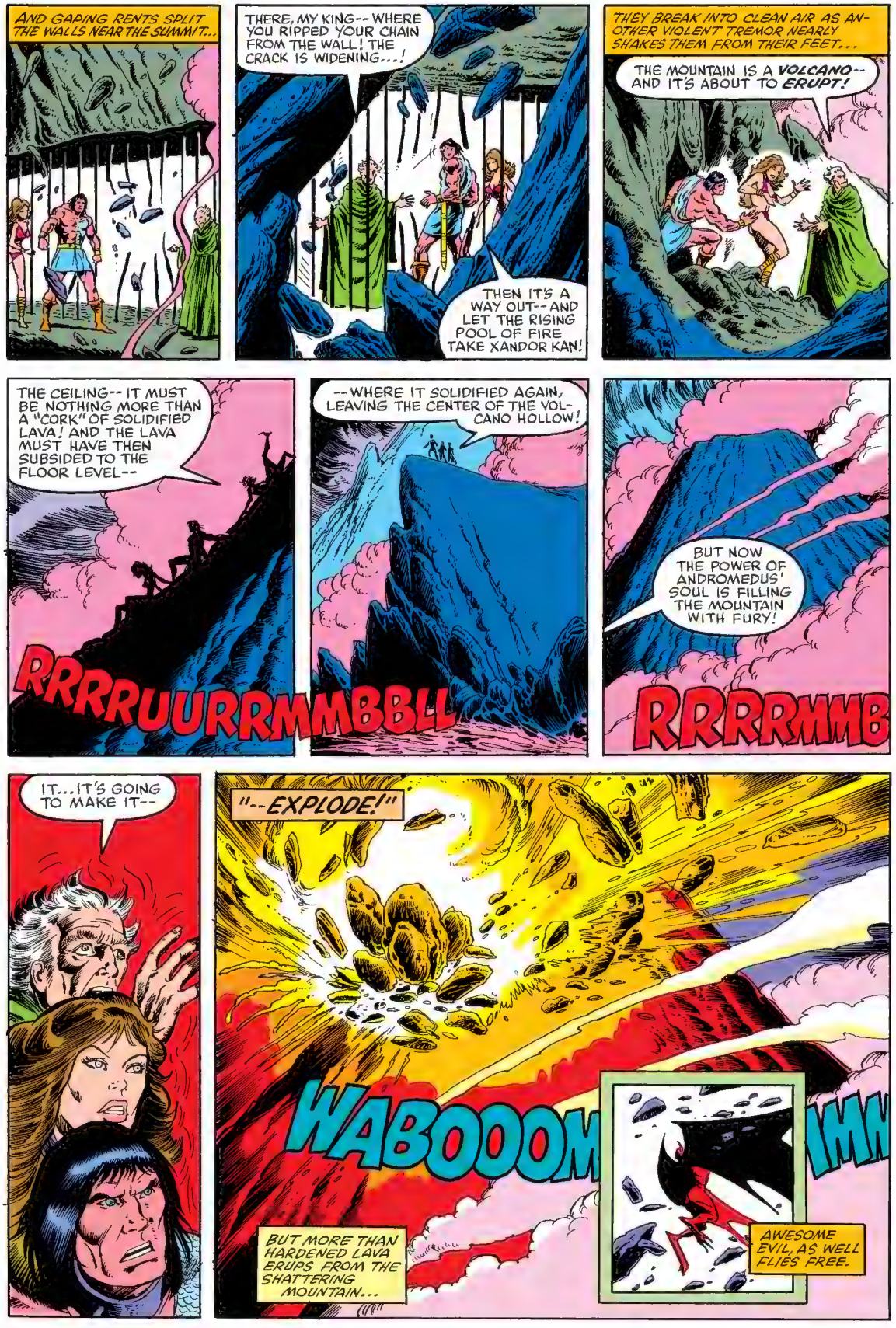
THE BOLTS ARE TOO SECURE! HOW LONG HAVE I BEEN OUT, ALCEMIDES?
LONG ENOUGH, MY KING, FOR XANDOR KAN TO BEGIN HIS RITES OF RENEWAL...
YOU SEE--? THAT'S HOW HE HAS MANAGED TO LIVE SO LONG! HE DRAWS STRENGTH--LIFE ITSELF--FROM THAT...THAT THING!
AND LOOK--THE UNDEAD ONE IS THE SOURCE OF THE MAGNETISM, OR SOME OTHER FORCE, WHICH ATTRACTS LODESTONE! THE COMPASS POINTS DIRECTLY AT IT!
THE WAY XANDOR KAN BREEDS THESE PITIFUL CREATURES LIKE CATTLE TO FEED HIS FOUL POWER--
--HE MUST BE STOPPED! IF HE DID THIS TO ANDROMEDUS--
HE'LL BE STOPPED--BUT SPARE ME ANY MORE ABOUT ANDROMEDUS. I'VE NEVER EVEN MET THE MAN AND ALREADY I HATE HIM.
PRAISE MITRA YOU ORDERED THE PITCH TO BE TORCHED, CONAN!
EH--?
IT'S BURNED ALL THE WAY UP HERE--AND IT'S CRACKING THE WALL!
AYE, PHILOSOPHER ...SO IT IS!
KLANG!
STAY HERE.
I'LL BE BACK TO FREE YOU--
--AS SOON AS I FIND THAT SILVER AXE.
THEN, WITH XANDOR KAN STILL IMMERSED IN HIS RENEWAL, CONAN SLIPS FROM THE SPIRAL CAGE...
...AND STOOPS TO HEFT A LARGE ROCK...

KRAK
MY THANKS, KING CONAN, FOR FREEING ME AT LAST FROM HIS DARK SPELL.
THUD!
EH?! YOU... YOU CAN SPEAK?!
AYE, AND I AM AWARE OF ALL THAT HAS TRANSPIRED SINCE YOU ARRIVED IN THIS HELLISH PLACE...
...AND AWARE, TOO, OF ETERNITIES BEFORE THAT...
FOR YOU SEE, I AM YOUR PREDECESSOR... THE FIRST OF YOUR LINE...
IN TRUTH, I AM ALL THAT REMAINS OF KING ANDROMEDUS.
WHAT?! CROM'S DEVILS, BUT--
LISTEN, CONAN, AND HEED ME WELL! I AM THE PERVERTED LIFE ESSENCE OF MY FORMER SOUL! YOU CANNOT IMAGINE WHAT XANDOR KAN HAS DONE TO ME, WHAT HELLISH RITES HAVE BEEN PERFORMED OVER ME...
...WHAT DARK SORCERIES HAVE BEEN FORCED INTO ME--ALL TO MY ABIDING AND ENDURING TORMENT!
AND SOON... SOON WILL COME THE CRUELEST BLASPHEMY OF ALL--WHEN HE USES ME TO DESTROY THE VERY KINGDOM I CREATED...
AYE, AND THE REST OF THE WORLD BEYOND...
...UNLESS YOU DESTROY ME FIRST --IN MERCY--TO PRESERVE THE WORLD WE BOTH HOLD TO BE SACRED.
AS YOUR KING, I BEG OF YOU-- DESTROY ME, MY KING!
AT FIRST HE CLAIMED TO CARE NOTHING FOR THE BEING CALLED ANDROMEDUS...
RECENTLY, HE HAS PROFESSED ACTUAL HATRED.
BUT NOW... NOW...!

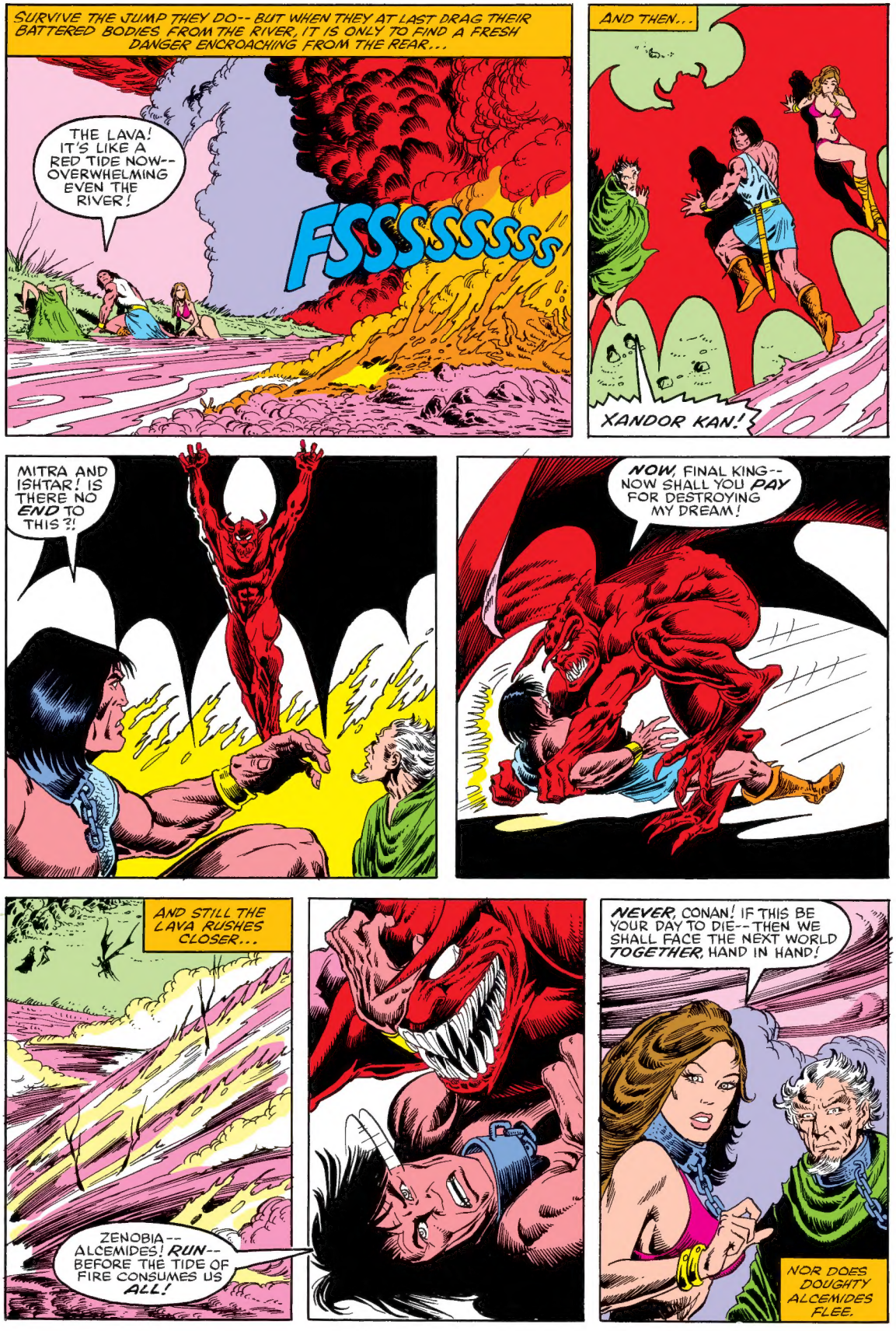

AYE, ANDROMEDUS --I'LL DO WHATEVER YOU ASK.
THEN DO AS XANDOR KAN DID! POINT YOUR RIGHT ARM AT ME AND YOUR LEFT AT THE LEDGE BEHIND YOU...
LET THE SORCERY PASS THROUGH YOUR BODY TO SHATTER THE LEDGE.
BUT...WHY? FOR WHAT PURPOSE?
SO I MAY JOIN WITH THE HOT BLOOD OF THE WORLD ITSELF AND THUS END MY TORMENT.
DO AS I BID, AND YOU WILL SEE.
CONAN OBEYS, OVERCOMING FIERCE RELUCTANCE IN SO DOING.
ALL HIS LIFE HE HAS LOATHED AND FEARED SORCERY, NEVER DREAMING THAT HE WOULD SOMEDAY COMMAND IT HIMSELF...
BUT NOW, FEELING THE STRANGE FORCE SURGE THROUGH EVERY FIBER OF HIS BEING--
SHRIK!
--HE MUST ADMIT THAT THE RESULTS OF SUCH POWER ARE EXTREMELY SEDUCTIVE.
THE EFFORT THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN REQUIRED TO PERFORM THE SAME FEAT WITH BRAWN ALONE...!
BUT THEN, ALL AWE IS ABRUPTLY DASHED FROM HIS MIND.
FOR THE LEDGE-SHARD, PLUMMETING PAST THE SPIRAL CAGES, SUNDERS THE FAR FLOOR...
...AND A BRIGHT PILLAR OF LAVA RISES FROM BELOW.
BOOM!
WHAMM!
FFFSSSSS

MOLTEN FIRE--WELLING UP--RISING HIGHER! BUT THE PALE ONES--TRAPPED IN THE CAGES!
AYE, CONAN, I KNOW...
THEY ARE DESCENDANTS OF THE SOLDIERS WHO CAME WITH ME TO BATTLE XANDOR KAN, AND OF HILLWOMEN HE ABDUCTED FROM THEIR HUTS--BUT THEIR TORMENT, TOO, IS BETTER ENDED IN UNION WITH THE WORLD'S BLOOD.
NOW HURL ME, KING CONAN, INTO THE RISING SEA OF FIRE!
HURL YOU--? AYE, ANDROMEDUS...
BUT FIRST I MUST FREE MY QUEEN--AND ALCEMIDES!
YET, EVEN AS HE SWIFTLY SHATTERS THEIR NECK CHAINS...
CONAN--!
EH--?
...XANDOR KAN RISES.
QUICKLY, CONAN--OR I WILL AGAIN FALL UNDER HIS THRALL! STOP HIM--AND END IT! END MY HORROR BEFORE--
SILENCE, UNDEAD ONE! YOU ARE ALREADY MINE!
NOT IF I CAN HELP IT, DEVIL-SPAWN!
THE AXE CATCHES THE DEMON FULL FORCE...
...AND TOPPLES HIM FROM THE PRECIPICE.
BUT THE WOUND, THOUGH PAINFUL, IS NOT A MORTAL ONE...

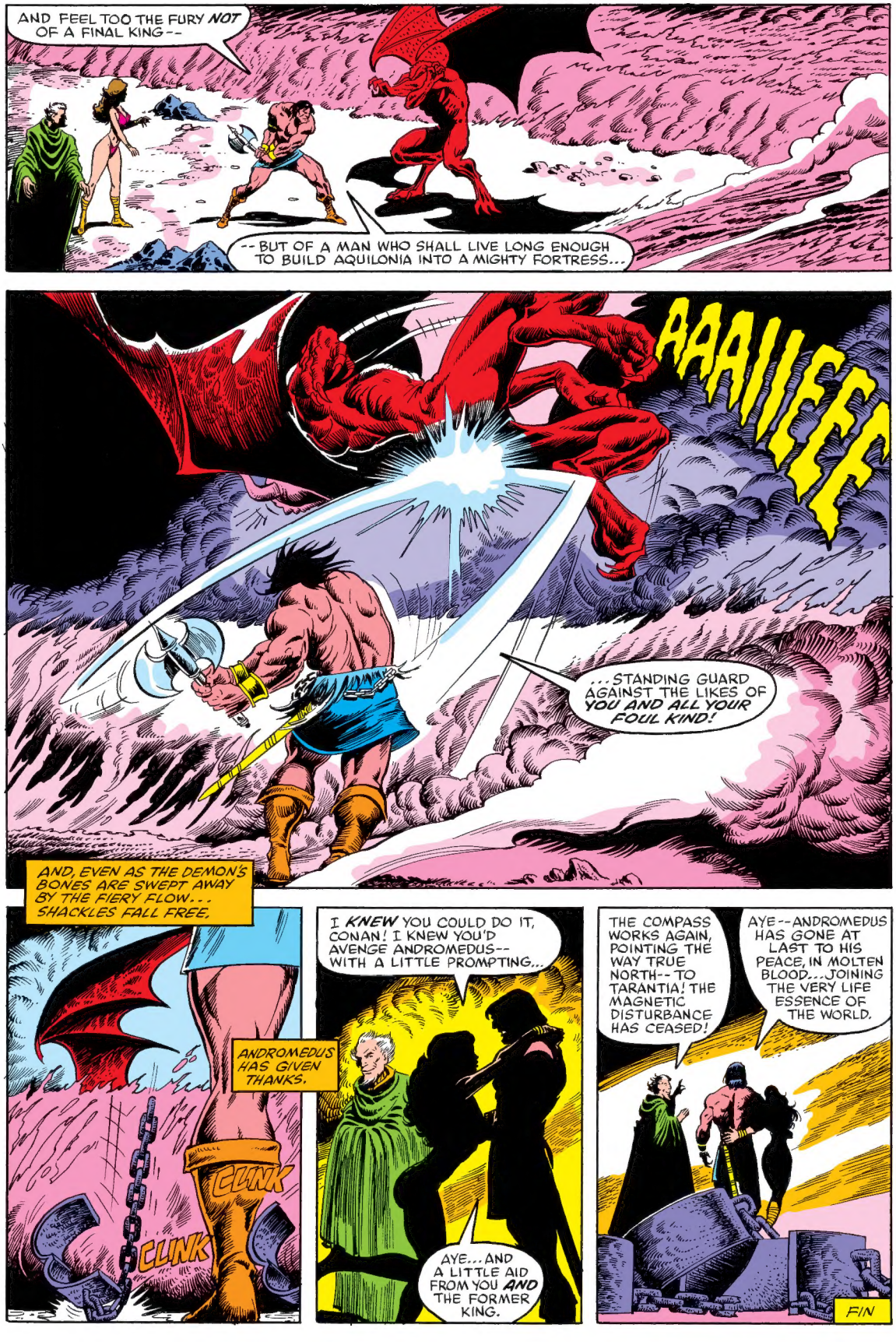
...AND XANDOR KAN, FALLING BUT ONE LEVEL OF THE SPIRAL LEDGE, HALTS HIMSELF...
...AND THEN, EVEN AS THE MOUNTAIN TREMBLES, BEGINS HIS INEXORABLE CLIMB BACK TOWARD THE SUMMIT.
GET TO ANDROMEDUS, CONAN! HURL HIM DOWN-- QUICKLY--
-- BEFORE XANDOR KAN MAKES HIS WAY BACK UP!
AYE, ZENOBIA...
...THOUGH I KNOW NOT IF I HAVE THE STRENGTH!
IF YOU HAVE THE WILL, FELLOW KING--
--THEN YOU SHALL FIND THE STRENGTH!
A NOBLE NOTION, ANDROMEDUS...
...AND ONE THAT I'VE ALWAYS SHARED!
YOU AND I, IT SEEMS, HAVE MUCH IN COMMON!
MUCH, YES-- BUT NOT THIS.
THE UNDEAD ONE-- THE THING THAT ONCE WAS ANDROMEDUS-- BREAKS THE SURFACE OF THE MOLTEN FLOOR...
SSSSSSSSS
AND, AS IF A CATALYST TOWARD DOOM, IT CAUSES THE MOUNTAIN TO QUAKE MORE VIOLENTLY.
THE LAVA RISES FASTER, CONSUMING THOSE PALE ONES IN THE LOWER STATIONS OF THE SPIRAL CAGES...


AND GAPING RENTS SPLIT THE WALLS NEAR THE SUMMIT...
THERE, MY KING-- WHERE YOU RIPPED YOUR CHAIN FROM THE WALL! THE CRACK IS WIDENING...!
THEN IT'S A WAY OUT-- AND LET THE RISING POOL OF FIRE TAKE XANDOR KAN!
THEY BREAK INTO CLEAN AIR AS ANOTHER VIOLENT TREMOR NEARLY SHAKES THEM FROM THEIR FEET...
THE MOUNTAIN IS A VOLCANO-- AND IT'S ABOUT TO ERUPT!
THE CEILING-- IT MUST BE NOTHING MORE THAN A "CORK" OF SOLIDIFIED LAVA! AND THE LAVA MUST HAVE THEN SUBSIDED TO THE FLOOR LEVEL--
RRRRUURRMMBBLL
--WHERE IT SOLIDIFIED AGAIN, LEAVING THE CENTER OF THE VOLCANO HOLLOW!
BUT NOW THE POWER OF ANDROMEDUS' SOUL IS FILLING THE MOUNTAIN WITH FURY!
RRRRMMB
IT...IT'S GOING TO MAKE IT--
"--EXPLODE!"
WABOOOM
IMM
BUT MORE THAN HARDENED LAVA ERUPS FROM THE SHATTERING MOUNTAIN...
AWESOME EVIL, AS WELL FLIES FREE.

THE PEAK WE'RE ON--IT'S SPLINTERING...
...FALLING AWAY--TO LEAVE NAUGHT BUT A THIN PILLAR!
BUT DARE WE RISK THE JUMP INTO THE RIVER, HUSBAND? COULD WE SURVIVE IT?
THE CHOICE IS MADE IN A FINAL CATACLYSM...
...AND DICTATED BY ITS AFTERMATH--A HUGE CHUNK OF THE DEVASTATED ROCK "CEILING," NOW TUMBLING SWIFTLY TOWARDS THEM.
CONAN LOOKS ONCE AT THE BOULDER--
--AND ONCE AT THE RUSHING WATERS OF THE KHOROTAS RIVER BELOW...
THE TIME HAS COME, ZENOBIA--
--TO FIND OUT!
KRABASSH!


SURVIVE THE JUMP THEY DO-- BUT WHEN THEY AT LAST DRAG THEIR BATTERED BODIES FROM THE RIVER, IT IS ONLY TO FIND A FRESH DANGER ENCROACHING FROM THE REAR...
THE LAVA! IT'S LIKE A RED TIDE NOW-- OVERWHELMING EVEN THE RIVER!
FSSSSSSSS
AND THEN...
XANDOR KAN!
MITRA AND ISHTAR! IS THERE NO END TO THIS?!
NOW, FINAL KING-- NOW SHALL YOU PAY FOR DESTROYING MY DREAM!
AND STILL THE LAVA RUSHES CLOSER...
ZENOBIA-- ALCEMIDES! RUN-- BEFORE THE TIDE OF FIRE CONSUMES US ALL!
NEVER, CONAN! IF THIS BE YOUR DAY TO DIE-- THEN WE SHALL FACE THE NEXT WORLD TOGETHER, HAND IN HAND!
NOR DOES DOUGHTY ALCEMIDES FLEE.

THEN THE LAVA IS UPON THEM, NOT EVEN A YARD AWAY, STEAMING AND BURBLING WITH A HEAT TO MELT FLESH FROM BONE...
ZENOBIA AND ALCEMIDES BRACE THEMSELVES FOR AN END IN AGONY.
BUT SUCH AN END NEVER COMES, NOT THIS DAY...
SSWOOOSH
INSTEAD, THEY OPEN DISBELIEVING EYES TO FIND THE LAVA FLOW SPLIT IN TWAIN.
AND FROM THE VERY FORK A SILVER AXE IS SOMEHOW HURLED.
ANDROMEDUS--! HE'S AIDING US--EVEN AS HE DIES--GIVING US OUR SALVATION, CONAN, EVEN AS YOU GAVE HIM HIS!
REACH OUT, MY HUSBAND--
--AND TAKE IT!
NOW, FIEND OF FIENDS--FEEL THE SURE BITE OF SILVER!
TASTE THE AXE OF ANDROMEDUS!


AND FEEL TOO THE FURY NOT OF A FINAL KING--
--BUT OF A MAN WHO SHALL LIVE LONG ENOUGH TO BUILD AQUILONIA INTO A MIGHTY FORTRESS...
AAAIIEEE
...STANDING GUARD AGAINST THE LIKES OF YOU AND ALL YOUR FOUL KIND!
AND, EVEN AS THE DEMON'S BONES ARE SWEPT AWAY BY THE FIERY FLOW... SHACKLES FALL FREE.
CLINK
CLINK
ANDROMEDUS HAS GIVEN THANKS.
I KNEW YOU COULD DO IT, CONAN! I KNEW YOU'D AVENGE ANDROMEDUS-- WITH A LITTLE PROMPTING...
AYE... AND A LITTLE AID FROM YOU AND THE FORMER KING.
THE COMPASS WORKS AGAIN, POINTING THE WAY TRUE NORTH-- TO TARANTIA! THE MAGNETIC DISTURBANCE HAS CEASED!
AYE--ANDROMEDUS HAS GONE AT LAST TO HIS PEACE, IN MOLTEN BLOOD... JOINING THE VERY LIFE ESSENCE OF THE WORLD.
FIN

KING CONAN

% MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

LOUISE JONES
EDITOR
DANNY FINGEROTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

Dear Louise,

I'm pleased to say that the switch from quarterly to bi-monthly publication has not hurt the quality of the series at all. Doug Moench continues to turn out some fine stories, the current issue: #12's "The Tombs Under Tarantia" being a fine example. What sets KING CONAN apart from the other two Conan mags is its regular cast of supporting characters which Doug uses most effectively, especially Prince Conn. The character Darweena was also cleverly incorporated into the plot this issue via Mimus's reserve magic spell. To top things off, Ron Frenz and Ricardo Villamonte did a very good job on the artwork, most notably on the cover.

On to a few suggestions. I think it would be interesting to see Conan return to Cimmeria, accompanied by Conn. I'll bet Doug could weave a good tale out of that premise. Another interesting idea would be to depict Aquilonia in a major war with one of its neighboring states, but with little or no sorcery involved in the conflict, just realistic strategies and battle formations and the like. Finally, I don't think you need feel compelled to turn out a thirty-eight page story each issue. Although I prefer the longer stories, I think it would be a great idea to print two shorter stories on occasion. This would give Conn a chance at solo stories as well as permit King Kull or Red Sonja back-ups. Consider it.

Gino D'Ambrosio
4651 S. Austin
Seattle, WA 98118

You're right about the supporting cast setting this book apart, Gino. That, along with the mood we're able to create by a fixed place setting, Aquilonia, gives the KING CONAN stories a quite different feel from the tales of the youthful wanderer. As for your suggestions, each of them is worth considering, and you can be sure you'll find much to your satisfaction in issues ahead.

Dear Sword Swingers,

KING CONAN #12 was super! Ron Frenz's art was wonderful, and Doug Moench's script was at its usual level of perfection.

One question: on page 11, panel 9, the two children with Zenobia — are they more of the King's heirs, or was the queen babysitting?

Edward Fields
200 Moore's Lake Road
Wadesboro, NC 28170

Those little tykes are indeed the future Conans of Aquilonia, Edward. You'll be seeing more of them in the future.

Dear Louise,

Hoo-hah! I said it before and I'll say it again: hang on to Ron Frenz. Without a doubt, he is one of the most talented newcomers in the business. He's obviously a student of the work of John Buscema, and that's definitely okay with me! Ricardo Villamonte'ss inking was great too, leaving an almost Ploogish look to a number of pages. In all honesty, I feel that someone like Pablo Marcos is more suited for inking these pages, but Ricardo pleasantly surprised me. With all this going for the art, how could I be less than entertained? Give Ron a regular pencil job, okay? I'd love to see his stuff on a super hero mag.

Don't think I've forgotten Doug Moench either. His work here has been superb. Doug brings believability and compassion to the dialogue and characters, although Darweena's sudden defense of king and country seemed a touch too convenient. But I'm ecstatic that someone's finally turning Zenobia into more than a cardboard character. The outburst on page 29 was the first sign of real emothion we've seen from this character. Sometimes writers get too caught up in plying readers with exotic scenery and fight scenes to remember to breathe life into their entire cast. Thank you, Doug. I hope that you continue to focus on these things and that we start seeing a bit of palace intrigue. That's what I miss! A bit of skullduggery is due for an appearance, methinks.

Even though I've enjoyed all the recent issues' artwork, I'd like to see a regular creative team at work on KING CONAN. See what you can do.

P.S. How about "Mightiest Letters of a Time Lost Page" for a lettercol title? Hee hee hee.

Greg "Hawkeye" Fuhr
2132 Rae Street
Regina, Saskatchewan
Canada

Well, how will dazzling Doug Moench, mighty Mark Silvestri, and rollicking Ricardo Villamonte do for openers on our regular lineup, Greg? With these three steering the helm, you'll be seeing even more of the characterization, mood and plots you've been praising above. And that's what makes the world of comical-type books go 'round, right?

Dear Louise,

KING CONAN #12 was undoubtedly a success. The story was well scripted above an excellent plot, and the artwork was also superb. I have only one complaint — I would like to move beyond sorcerers, demons, and evil spirits for awhile. How about a little change of pace in the near future?

Ryan McGaughy
15 Upper Falls Creek Road
Elma, WA 98541

Well, it's time for the ballot box again, folks, and this time we want to hear from each and every one of you out there: more sorcery or less? It seems there's a real live issue here, so let's start taking sides now. And hopefully by the time we're ready to print the results, there'll be a real title to the column in these pages. Our next reader suggests a few in the body of the following letter...

Dear KING CONAN Crew,

KING CONAN #12 was a feast for mind and eye! I will really miss John Buscema's work on these pages, but Ron Frenz's breakdowns sort of had the Buscema touch. And Ricardo Villamonte's embellishment gave body and solidity to the artwork.

It was nice to see Doug Moench delving further into the characters and their personalities. That is one thing that gives KING CONAN that sort of magic that the early CONAN THE BARBARIAN had. Doug's handling of Alcemides this issue was great. The fact that Mimus's daughter was responsible for the release of the demon greatly added to the story. I'd like to see Zenobia and Conn explored more in future stories. Conn's barbaric arrogance is already beginning to flare up as shown on page 8. These tidbits of characterization really make me look forward to future issues. Keep this up!

As far as continued stories go, don't do anything longer than a two-parter. Remember, this is a bi-monthly, and one of the few Marvel mags that usually wraps up its stories in one issue. I don't think I could stand the sixty day wait between issues if an adventure should go beyond the regular thirty-eight pages.

As for the letter column, how about the following title suggestions: "Tomes to the King," "Missives to the Monarch," "Aquilonian Express," "Royal Scrolls," "Aquilonian Scrolls," "Tarantian Chronicles." Well, you get the idea.

KING CONAN has really become one of my favorite mags. Thanks.

Gordon Manley
P.O. Box 3041
Portsmouth, VA 23701